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EAST SIXTEENTH STREET, NEW YORK

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Two Cousins and a Castle

Mollie H. Rice

TWO COUSINS AND A CASTLE.

CHAPTER I.

It was nine o'clock and quite dark. The clumsy, old-fashioned carriage floundered heavily along the muddy, tortuous lanes, now crawling slowly up a long incline, now swinging downwards again into the adjoining hollow, at a pace which caused it to sway and roll from side to side in a truly alarming manner.

All day long it had rained incessantly, but now that the night had fallen, the rain had nearly stopped—only the wind moaned and sobbed with unabated violence, and the dark rows of trees which overhung the narrow roads clashed their interlacing branches angrily together overhead.

For a long while neither of the occupants of the carriage had exchanged a word. They sat together side by side in silence, like faint

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ghostly shadows, within the gloom of the roomy interior.

Every now and then one of the two bent forward and peered eagerly and anxiously out of the window, but in the fitful glimmer of the carriage lamps nothing could be clearly distinguished save the swift passing banks and hedgerows; the gnarled trunks of the oaks or elms, gleaming pale and gray out of the surrounding blackness, and the glitter of the frequent pools of water left by the heavy rain in the deep ruts along the roads.

Once or twice the carriage swept out of the hills and woods into more open valleys; there came the dark outlines of clustering cottages, the red glow of lights in the curtainless windows, the bark of a dog, or the shout of a child, then the village was left behind; and once more came the narrow lanes with their steep banks and over-arching trees, and the unbroken blackness of the forest.

An impatient sigh broke the silence.

"Is there never to be an end of this dreadful drive!" said a fretful young voice.

"It is ten miles, remember," replied the other voice gently; "ten miles through an unknown country and in the dark, always appears to take

much longer than it really does. But I fancy we must be nearly out of the hills by now, and if so, we shall soon be at our journey's end. Listen, Mab! surely there is another sound besides the wind! is not that the rush of waves? Ah—yes! I am sure we must be getting near the sea now: one can almost smell the salt!"

The mother and daughter pressed their faces eagerly to the window: the dark veil of trees had thinned, the leaden skies showed oftener; through the now more frequent openings they could see a vast plain of space and nothingness before them: it was as Mrs. Eardley said, they were leaving the hilly country and approaching the sea.

"One can always tell that the sea is near even in the dark," observed Mab. "How far off is it to the Castle now, mother?"

"I cannot remember. It is so many many years since I was here—only that once, as I told you, before I was married. But I recollect perfectly that the road runs for a few miles close along the shore. In five-and-twenty years one's memories have time to grow dim and blurred," she added, musingly.

There was a moment or two of silence, and

then the voice of the girl broke forth in a sudden outburst of impetuous emotion.

"Mother! why are we here now? I hate myself for coming! For all these years, as you say, he has taken no notice of you, has left you to struggle alone, to fight out your long widowhood without a word of help or sympathy, and now because some sudden whim has seized him —some caprice for which there can be surely no good or praiseworthy motive—he suddenly beckons to you to come and be a recipient of his charity! and we uproot ourselves from our home and are hurried across England at the pleasure of this old autocrat to whom we owe nothing, absolutely nothing!"

The mother laid her gentle hand upon her child's in the darkness and checked her breathless words.

"Hush, Mab, hush! Must I go all over the old ground again to you? You must remember that he had much to try him in the past, much to excuse his subsequent conduct to me. Your father's marriage to me was a bitter blow to him. We were married, you know, in the face of his disapproval, his distinct prohibition even; he was very angry, justly angry, I know, and he could never bring himself to forgive

your father or to receive me. He looked upon our offense as an unpardonable one. I cannot entirely blame him——"

"But, then, why now?—why?" broke in the impatient voice of the girl.

"You mean, why should he suddenly change his aspect toward us and offer us a home? Well, my dear Mab, that I cannot rightly tell you; I only know that your grandfather is an old man, and that his heart perhaps may have softened towards your father's memory, and that for his sake it may be that he desires to know you, and to befriend us both before he dies. It is not for me to refuse the hand thus held out to me."

"Well, I don't agree with you, mother. I think you should have shown a little pride and spirit; I think you should have rejected his proposal with scorn. You should have told him that you and your daughter had done so well without him for so long, that we could perfectly well manage to do without him to the end of the chapter!"

"Ah, Mab! you are young, and that is why you are so intolerant!" answered Mrs. Eardley, with a sigh. "You have promised me, remember, that you will accept my decision in this

matter, and that you will—for my sake and for your dead father's sake—treat your grandfather with respect and affection."

For one moment she had hesitated, doubting within herself whether she would not tell her child fully all the mixed motives which had induced her to accept her father-in-law's offer; whether she would speak to Mab of her own failing health, of the money losses she had lately sustained, which had lessened her small income, and of the half held-out hope of future provision for her daughter, which had all influenced her in her decision; and then she told herself that it was better not. Mab was only twenty. Why shadow her young life with troubles and anxieties which she was over young to share? or introduce any interested feeling into her mind which might ruin the natural goodfellowship which she hoped might arise between the grandfather and the child of his dead son.

"Here we are close to the sea!" was her only remark. Mab bent her long neck forward; she experienced all a child's excitement at the sight of the big waves dashing up amongst the black rocks, which could now be plainly distinguished close below the road. She forgot her anger and indignation against the grand-

father who had waited twenty years to remember her existence.

Presently the carriage began to climb a long steep hill, and Mrs. Eardley's heart began to beat, for she knew that Portalloc Castle crowned the summit; and presently the horses turned in at a great stone gateway and came to a halt in a wide dark square in front of a gloomy closed door.

Mrs. Eardley's hand closed nervously upon Mab's.

"Be good, Mab! help me by being good!" she said, tremulously.

"Why, of course, mother darling!" answered the girl cheerily, and then the door was opened to receive them.

CHAPTER II.

PORTALLOC CASTLE crowned the summit of a hill that was richly wooded on the land side, but fell away abruptly into a rocky precipice towards the sea, which washed its dark and weather-stained base. At a distance it was an exceedingly imposing edifice—it was only when you came close up to it, through the long upward drive, bordered by woods of beech and Spanish chestnuts, of larch and of mountain ash, that you became aware of the fact that it was three parts a ruin. As you passed under the great gateway, flanked by two round towers, where the rusted portcullis still hung immovable in its place overhead, you perceived at once that it must be centuries since the gray and crumbling battlements had been tenanted by aught but the bats and the owls. Three sides of the square within were merely ivy-covered walls, with glassless mullioned windows like sightless eyes, and a fallen débris of stone rubble at their feet, over which time had flung a mantle of ferns and flowering creepers, so that they made

a natural garden border. On the fourth side of the courtyard a whole wing of the old structure had by some miracle been preserved intact. It was the side that faced the sea, and it was probably to this fact that it owed its preservation; for Portalloc had figured on many a bloody page of history, and twice during the wars of the Commonwealth, it had been besieged by Cromwell's army. On the first occasion, the siege had been raised and the beleaguered garrison safely relieved, and the Castle had remained uninjured. But two years later Portalloc fared worse. The Roundhead cannon-balls had knocked the old walls to pieces, the roof of the chapel had caught fire, and the whole structure was burnt to the ground; but on the side towards the sea the invaders had not been able to do any substantial damage, for they could only get at the Castle from the land side: towards the sea it was virtually impregnable. So the front wing was left standing, and has continued to be inhabited unto this day. The old family, indeed, of the Portallocs had now been long extinct; they had been succeeded by three generations of a family of the name of Morris, the last of whom, having exhausted his substance in riotous living,

sold away as much of the property as he could; and finally, the old shell of the Castle was put up to auction with some four or five hundred acres of land pertaining to it; and the present Mr. Eardley's father, who was a student and a recluse, and who had been looking out for a quiet house in which to write and study, happened to hear of the sale; he came down from London and bought it then and there, at a very moderate price. He had renovated and restored, and to some extent modernized, the habitable wing of the house, but substantially it was very much the same as when Cromwell's shells had bombarded it, and as it had been for centuries before his day.

When the morning sunshine came streaming in through the narrow diamond-paned windows of Mabel Eardley's bedroom, she jumped hastily out of bed and ran eagerly to look out of them.

What she saw made her utter a cry of delight. She seemed to be looking from a great height straight down into the sea. Before her lay a lovely bay bounded by distant hills; a little town of white houses shone in the sunshine at the head of the bay, whilst a whole fleet of fishing smacks were standing out to sea, the light breeze that ruffled the turquoise blue

of the water, filling their red-brown sails as they skimmed away towards the west. Mab ran into her mother's room, which led out of her own, and with the inconsequent selfishness of youth awoke her peremptorily from her sleep.

"Mother! quick! wake up! you must come and look! it's the most beautiful place in the world!" she cried.

"Oh, my dear!" remonstrated Mrs. Eardley, but of course she got up and went to the window too, although the view from Portalloc was neither so novel nor so delightful to her as to her child. Mothers are very commonly dragged about by the impetuosity of their children.

Last night they had seen nothing of the place, not even the old grandfather, who was in the habit of retiring early, and who had already gone to his own rooms.

More dead than alive with fatigue and hunger, they were led by the housekeeper into a small ill-lighted room, where supper had been prepared for them, and then immediately afterwards they had been thankful to go to bed. Mab had tumbled into hers, a little white cot of the most modern type, with extraordinary rapidity, and no sooner had she laid her head on her pillow than she fell sound asleep. But Mrs. Eard-

ley had lain awake far into the night. This return to Portalloc was fraught to her with painful memories of the past, and with anxious uncertainties for the future. As she had told Mab, she had once been here before, and on that occasion she entered the house in a very lowly position, for she had come to it as the paid companion of an old Miss Eardley, long since dead, who was an aunt of her husband's. Here it was that she had formed a sudden and romantic friendship with the daughter of the house, and here, too, had the only son of the house, young Herbert Eardley, still in his college days, fallen desperately in love with her, and had wooed and won her heart. Naturally, there was a storm of indignation when the secret came out. Miss Eardley gave her her fare to London, and dismissed her instantly from her service; and Mr. Eardley furiously forbade his son ever to hold any communication with the low-born hussy again. Nothing daunted, Herbert followed his love up to town, and, aided and abetted by his sister Amabel, who happened to be paying a visit to friends in London, he defied his father's wrath and married her, Amabel only being present at their wedding.

For this act of rebellion Amabel, too, fell into

disgrace, and she still further alienated her father's affection by herself marrying soon after against his wishes. He did not indeed, actually quarrel with his daughter when she became the wife of a Birmingham manufacturer who had raised himself from a very humble origin into a position of great wealth and importance, but his money scarcely counted as a redeeming feature of the case in his father-in-law's eyes. Mr. and Mrs. Spinks continued, indeed, to play an annual visit to Portalloc every Christmas until her death, but he disliked his son-in-law, and he hardened his heart against Amabel, and never really forgave her.

As for poor Herbert he was cut off entirely. But for a small independent fortune which came to him from his mother, he would have been left to starve. His marriage was a very happy one, but his happiness was destined to be grief. He died five years later, when Mab was an infant. Since then twenty years had gone by, and the widow and her child had seemingly been entirely forgotten by the lonely old man at Portalloc.

It had come to Mrs. Herbert Eardley's knowledge that, had her child been a boy, her father-in-law would not possibly have estranged him-

self so completely from her. The son of his son would have touched some chord of pride and possessorship within him, but a girl was of no value to him. He had wished for a grandson, and the only grandson vouchsafed to him was one who did not bear his name. Amabel's marriage had been blessed with only one child, a boy.

Mrs. Eardley thought much and shrewdly about this boy whilst she was dressing. She had her own suspicions as to the causes of her father-in-law's unexpected overtures to her; but naturally she had not communicated them to Mabel. She had her own game to play, and she knew that it was a very difficult game, and that she must play it carefully. She had no one to help her; Amabel, who had been her friend, was long dead, and she did not know her son. She and her child must stand or fall by their own wits.

Just as she had finished dressing, Mab came hurriedly into her room with a rather white, frightened face. She was completely dressed, but all the bright color had vanished from her cheeks.

"Mother," she said in a whisper, "grandpapa has sent a message to me to come alone to his

room, before he sees you! What am I to do?"

"Why, go, of course! how can you help yourself? How are you to find the way?"

"His servant is waiting in the passage to take me to him. Oh, mother! what am I to say to him? how am I to talk to him?"

"Say what first comes into your head, and talk perfectly naturally. Stay, Mab!" with a little laugh which served to conceal her own intense nervousness, "did you not recommend 'pride and spirit' to me last night? are you not inclined to try your own prescription now?"

"Mother, don't—don't laugh! I am frightened to death!" cried Mab, shivering.

"Don't be a goose, he won't eat you!" replied her mother, playfully pushing her by the shoulders out of the room; but after Mab had gone she sank down on her knees and prayed desperately, and from the bottom of her heart.

CHAPTER III.

"COME in," said a voice inside.

Mab plucked up her courage, turned the handle of the door, and walked in.

She saw before her a very tall old man, standing in the middle of the room. So tall, indeed, was he, that his white head seemed to reach almost to the ceiling, which was low, and barred across at intervals by blackened beams of oak. He was very thin, almost emaciated indeed, and his long narrow face was seamed with innumerable wrinkles. His eyes shone out keen and clear beneath the bristling pent-house of his white eyebrows—they were large and dark and very brilliant still, despite his seventy years; his nose was long and pointed, and there was something curiously puzzling in the expression of the thin, pale lips beneath it—a certain tender wistfulness, a touch of fun and of humor hovering about them now and again, but which seldom lightened the cold severity of the fine but somewhat repelling eyes.

Mab, when she found herself inside the room,

stood still with her back to the door and her hands behind her back, taking stock of him as it were. He, too, on his part, took stock of her, and what he saw before him was this :—

A tall girl—she was half a head taller than her mother—with a graceful figure and bright brown hair and dark eyes that were like his own, not in expression, but in shape and color, and there the resemblance between them ceased, for Mab's nose was short and dainty, and her rose lips were full and curved, whilst her whole aspect was redolent of health and youth and happiness. She was like a young goddess of the Morning of Life.

"Well," said the old man at last when he had finished his scrutiny, "are you going to speak to me, Miss Eardley?"

"I am waiting for you to begin, Mr. Eardley," answered Mab, demurely, but with the ghost of a smile.

"Why should I begin, pray?" was the answer, with a curious twitching at the corner of the lips.

"Because you are the host, and I am your guest," replied Mab, promptly. "I consider it your place, therefore, to speak first to me."

Mr. Eardley threw back his head with a little

jerk. Memory began to play strange tricks with him—the tone of the voice, the manner, half audacious, half playful, the quickness of the ready answer, all these things brought back his dead son to him, in the living person of his young granddaughter.

He paused half a minute, then he held out his hand with a smile that banished all Mab's secret terrors at once.

"Good morning to you, then, granddaughter! I hope you are rested after your journey."

"Good morning to you, grandfather; I am quite rested, thank you, and so is mother."

"Come here, child."

She came up close to him and put her hand into his, and he bent down and kissed her on the forehead.

To himself the old man thought: "She will do. I like her." Aloud he said:—

"What do they call you, pray, Miss Granddaughter?"

"They call me Mab. I was christened Amabel after my aunt, Mrs. Spinks."

"Ah!" then after a pause, looking down at her fixedly, he added, "It's an ugly name, isn't it?"

"What—*Amabel?*" cried Mab, startled.

"No, Spinks. 'Spinks of Portalloc Castle' scarcely sounds euphonious, does it?"

"But—" faltered Mab, bewildered and yet half laughing, "but it was your own daughter's name, my poor aunt——"

Mr. Eardley nodded. "I know, I know! Poor Amabel! poor girl! she took the name for half a million of money! I don't blame her, it was perhaps worth it, but Spinks! faugh! it was paying dearly for money, all said and done."

"But if poor Aunt Amabel didn't mind it?"

"*It killed her!*" said Mr. Eardley, with portentous gravity, opening his eyes solemnly at her.

For the space of ten seconds Mab kept her countenance, then suddenly the corners of her mouth began to quiver, and the corners of her eyes to wrinkle, and straightway she burst into a peal of the most delightful rippling laughter that had awakened the echoes of the old walls for many a long year. It brought sunshine and music, youth, and life, and freshness, all together into the old house, and at the same time into the withered old heart of its master. As he watched her laugh, with her head a little thrown back, her red lips parted over the little white teeth that shone like pearls between them, it

came home to him that he had certainly thrown away twenty good years of his life, in that he had never made Amabel Eardley's acquaintance before. And the laughter was contagious: it did not perhaps strike him that the merriment was at the expense of his deceased daughter, whom he had certainly loved, although her plebeian marriage had been a source of so much disgust and annoyance to him—it only seemed to him that here, standing before him, was a creature who understood him, and who refused to be frightened by the little tricks and impostures he was so fond of trying upon people. Mab certainly would not take him too seriously, as all the rest had done!

And so he laughed too—a little chuckle of laughter that was not in the least beautiful or poetic like Mab's, but that was in truth as unwonted a sound in that low-ceiled oak-wainscoted room as that of the girl.

And it was at that moment that Mrs. Eardley, passing along the passage without, paused at the door, thunderstruck and bewildered, to listen. Emboldened by the sounds of merriment within, yet scarcely able to believe the evidence of her ears, she opened the door softly and peeped in.

To see Mab, who had left her ten minutes ago, trembling and pale at the dread thought of a private interview with her unknown grandfather, now laughing with the hearty enjoyment of a child, amazed, nay, it almost shocked her.

"My *dear* Mab!" she cried. "Oh, Mr. Eardley, what on earth has she been saying?"

The old man straightened his features at his daughter-in-law's entrance, and shook hands with her, with the utmost politeness and gravity. "Your daughter is a merry little puss, Marion!" he said, vaguely.

Mrs. Eardley glanced at Mab with an inquiry which merged itself into ill-concealed anxiety.

"Grandpapa is so amusing!" was all that Mab said. She, also, had recovered her gravity with astonishing rapidity at her mother's entrance.

And to the end of time Mrs. Eardley never heard any more about it than that.

They had evidently amused each other, the old man and the girl, but what had been the precise subject of their merriment they never either of them divulged.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER that auspicious beginning, breakfast in the long dining-room, with its many narrow windows, deep set into the thickness of the old walls, was by no means a formidable affair to Mab. She chattered away freely and naturally, raved about the beauty of Portalloc, of the delight of living in a real old house, and anxiously inquired concerning the existence of ghosts.

"The old Portallocs must have left one behind them surely, grandpapa! Pray don't spoil my illusions by telling me there are no ghosts!"

"I won't tell you so, Mab. There are plenty of ghosts here—they are with me always." And something in this answer sobered Mab down into sudden silence.

But Mrs. Eardley was still nervous and ill at ease, and when, after breakfast, the old man told Mab to run away to the housekeeper and get her to take her all over the house, and then turned to herself and desired her somewhat peremptorily to follow him into the library,

Marion Eardley could not help trembling almost as much as when, five and twenty years ago, Marion Moore had been summoned to that same library to a certain terrible interview, which she had never forgotten.

She had been dreadfully frightened of the grim old man in those days—she was scarcely less frightened of him now. The knowledge that all Mab's future probably lay in his hands, unnerved her. The child had evidently made a good impression upon him; for this much she felt thankful, but she was certain that he must have ulterior motives and intentions, and she did not credit him with over much spontaneous kindness of heart. After his cruel treatment of his own son, this was scarcely wonderful.

So with mutual misgivings they faced each other. She was standing, as it happened, on the self-same carpet, now worn and threadbare, and almost on the very same spot, as when, hand in hand with Herbert, she had stood before him trembling and weeping whilst he had cursed them both. Possibly the same memory recurred to him also, for, for some moments, he stood looking at her without speaking. Marion Moore had been a pretty girl. Marion Eardley was not pretty now. Her hair which she wore

in straight smooth bands on either side of her broad forehead after the fashion of her girlhood, was thin and streaked with gray, her once bright complexion had faded, her features were pinched, and her eyes, which had never been her best point, seemed shrunk and worn. Mr. Eardley, as he considered her, said to himself that she had never been half so good-looking as her daughter was. "What did poor Herbert see in her?" he thought, impatiently. "A commonplace woman enough, to my mind! No birth, no connections, no money! Good Lord! what a fool he was to throw himself away upon her!"

Then aloud he said:—

"We must understand one another, Marion."

"Yes, Mr. Eardley," she answered, meekly.

He hated meekness.

"I dare say you wonder why I have sent for you and your daughter after so many years——"

"Oh no. It is easy to guess that you were actuated by the best and kindest of motives. The position which I held as the wife of your dear son——" and for a moment memory overwhelmed her and she began to cry.

He hated tears with a deadly hatred.

"Pish!" he cried irritably, with an angry sniff. "For God's sake don't cry! if you hadn't

cried like a waterspout in this very room five and twenty years ago, who knows if I shouldn't have treated you both better!"

She dried her tears quickly: she saw that she had made a false move in giving way to them. "Please don't rake up the past, Mr. Eardley," she said, recovering herself with an effort, "nothing can be altered now."

The old man dropped down suddenly into a chair and sighed. "No, nothing!" he echoed gloomily, and there was a silence between them. "I have had great sorrows," he said presently, with a certain pathetic patience of voice and manner. "My children disappointed me, and now they are dead. I am an old man, and I am all alone. Soon I shall be dead and gone too, and there is no one left to bear my name."

Mrs. Eardley was surprised to find that she pitied him sincerely. No doubt it was all his own fault, for he had been harsh and hard to his children, and he had deserved to lose their affection, but when he spoke of himself as old and lonely, it went to her woman's heart, and she felt sorry for him.

"Dear Mr. Eardley!" she murmured sympathetically, and then she made a step forward and laid her fingers timidly upon the thin

shriveled hand that hung over the arm of his chair.

He did not withdraw it, he only turned and looked strangely at her. Instinctively he disliked her, because she had been the subject of his estrangement with his dead son, but he did not wish to quarrel with her now; on the contrary, it was his object to make a truce with her, because he wanted something, and that something could not be attained without her cooperation.

"I wish I had known that girl of yours sooner, Marion," he said, looking at her kindly.

With superhuman fortitude she forbore to make the obvious reply that it was entirely his own fault that he had not.

"You like her, then?" she said simply.

"I like her very much; so much indeed that, if you will fall into my wishes, I am ready to provide for her future."

Mrs. Eardley's heart began to beat—almost audibly—but she held her peace.

"Mind—I expect you to help, not to hinder me," he went on, casting at her one of those quick penetrating looks which she remembered so well of old. "You will have to agree to my conditions first."

"Don't you think you had better be a little more explicit?" she said very quietly.

The thin lips twisted themselves into a faint smile—he liked her better for that remark—it went much farther with him than tears or humility.

"She is no fool after all!" he thought; "perhaps there was something in her that poor Herbert could see, though no one else could!"

"You are quite right, my dear," he said aloud. "There is no use beating about the bush, is there?" but that was precisely what he had been doing. "I want to marry her to Amabel's son—to her cousin."

"Why?"

The query dropped sharply and swiftly from her lips. She had been expecting this, and it did not take her by surprise. She was only determined to stand her own ground and to fight every inch of the way.

"Because then I shall leave Portalloc to her."

She made no sort of reply.

He waited for a few minutes for an answer; for humble thanks, for grateful speeches; and because she said nothing he began to get angry, but his respect for her rose.

"Well?" he said irritably. "Have you nothing to say? Of course Tom Spinks is my only male descendant. I need not have considered your daughter at all. I can do what I like with the place—it would be perfectly easy to me to leave her out in the cold, and to make him my heir."

"Why don't you then?"

Mr. Eardley twisted himself about in his chair and laughed; it was a little contemptuous laugh at his own expense, if the truth be told, for he knew his own weak points better than any one else did.

"Well, you see, there's the name! *Spinks—Tom Spinks*—he wasn't even christened Thomas, which is a respectable name—Tom Spinks, Esq., of Portalloc Castle! Faugh! don't you think the very sound of it would make the old ghosts arise out of their graves again?"

Mrs. Eardley smiled. "He could surely change his name to yours?"

The old man brought his closed fist heavily down upon the table.

"No, that's just where it is!" he cried angrily; that old blockhead, his father—that low-born counter-jumper—that vulgar creature won't have it! he is proud of his Britannia

metal spoons, it appears—did you know that it was in Britannia metal spoons and forks, that the Spinks made their money? Well, he stood there, where you are, opposite to me, and swore by all that was holy, that Britannia metal was an honest trade—that he and his grandfather before him had made their money by it, and that his boy should never drop the name which he himself was not ashamed to bear! What do you think of that?"

"I think Mr. Spinks was right," replied Mrs. Eardley, calmly.

He stared at her for a minute, and then laughed shortly. "Oh, you do, do you? You think him a fine old specimen of an English tradesman? blunt and honest, and with no false shame about him, don't you?"

"Yes, certainly I do."

"Well, wait till you hear it all. The cad wasn't quite so proof against the bait as you imagine! Joe Spinks married Amabel because he wanted to lift himself out of the mire of middle-classdom—I hadn't forgotten that, you know! and at the bottom of his heart he'd dearly loved to see his son reigning here at Portalloc after I am gone. Only, he's so cunning he wants to keep the name in the business too.

The fellow had the impertience to lay down conditions to me. 'Nothing for nothing' was always the Spinks' motto, I imagine! Just as he was leaving the room he turned round as if the idea had only just occurred to him, and he said: 'If you'll get Tom to marry your other grandchild—poor Herbert's girl—in that case I'll consent to his taking on your name too—he can call himself "Spinks-Eardley" if you like, and that will satisfy all parties. You bring about that, sir, and leave them Portalloc, and I'll meet you half way about the settlements.' So that, Marion, my dear, is where the matter stands."

"And you consented?"

"Yes, I consented. He had it in writing from me, too, confound him!"

"You seem both to have made pretty free with my daughter's future, sir! She has never seen her cousin, she may not like him; he is a perfect stranger to her."

"Well, he is coming here for a month in a fortnight, so he won't be a stranger long. Will you consent to my conditions, Marion? and will you win Portalloc for your girl on my terms?"

"I will think it over," said Mrs. Eardley.

CHAPTER V.

Mr. Eardley of Portalloc Castle had at the bottom of his heart one great love, one unspoken weakness, one cherished possession, to protect which he would have fought to the death. And that love, that weakness, that dearly-cherished treasure, was Portalloc itself!

The old ruin which his father had bought, and where he himself had been born and had lived all his life, was as dear to him as the apple of his eye. Its antiquity was holy to him, its very fallen stones were sacred, the crumbling battlements and ivy-covered walls were the objects of his deep love and reverence, whilst the old low-ceiled rooms and long winding passages, the twisting stone staircases, with the broken tracery surrounding the arched doorways, and the half-defaced carvings of saints or demons upon capitals or bosses, which met one at every turn in that portion of the Castle in which he lived, were all infinitely precious and beautiful in his eyes. He loved Portalloc, in short, as a lover loves his mistress, blindly and devotedly.

It has been said, that to live in an old house is to identify one's self with its history, and with the history of those who have lived and died there in past ages, and so it was in his case. He had made himself intimately acquainted with every detail concerning the past history of Portalloc, and of the different dynasties who had reigned over it. He had spent many years of his life in studying ancient deeds and records, in hunting up old genealogies and in deciphering half-erased epitaphs, in order to root out the old traditions from the moldering soil of ages, and it had taken him a good six years to compile from these various sources of information his one and only contribution to literature, entitled *The History of Portalloc Castle, by its present owner*. The book when it came out—in three heavy volumes of closely-printed matter—was for the most part profoundly uninteresting to the world at large, being chiefly a record of obscure lives, of border frays between feudal chiefs who were little better than robbers, and of marriages and intermarriages between persons whose very names were lost in the mists of antiquity. Yet there was one portion of the book which was well worth reading, had mankind taken the trouble to wade through the dreariness of the

first two volumes to get to it. This was the stirring description of the two sieges of Portalloc by Oliver Cromwell: of the first that had been so gloriously raised, and of the second, that other disastrous one, which had reduced the proud fortress to ruins. In dealing with these scenes of violence and bloodshed, Mr. Eardley's style had warmed into something better and finer than anything else that he had ever written. The descriptions were graphic and life-like, the details were vigorously and picturesquely filled in; the story, in short, became life itself, and carried the readers along with it. The man felt it all with his heart and with his soul: the burning of the chapel, the breaches in the walls, the storming of the keep, the crash of falling masonry, all these things had burnt themselves into his imagination with a vivid intensity which made them as absolutely real to him as if he had witnessed them himself; and as a natural consequence, he made the story seem real to his readers.

Needless to say, no Irishman in all Erin's fair land ever cursed the memory of Oliver Cromwell with deeper and deadlier curses than did our friend Robert Eardley. The great rebel, who had dared to profane and partially destroy

his own adored and beloved Portalloc, was trebly anathematized on every occasion that Mr. Eardley looked out of his windows at the traces of the devastation which he and his troops had wrought.

Along with this secret idolatry, which no one, curiously enough, of all his family and friends had ever exactly fathomed, there had reigned in these latter days of his life a great anxiety, almost amounting to a sorrow.

What was to become of Portalloc after he was gone? He was not a rich man, and he had never been able to do more than just keep the place up as it stood; there were many essential repairs and restorations imperatively needed amongst the old walls and towers, if they were not to tumble down altogether during the next twenty years. Mr. Eardley himself, although he had patched and mended and done what he could, had never been able to do anything like what was necessary.

It had been his hope that his son would "marry money" and set the old place in thorough order. But his son had married a poor, paid companion, and it availed him nothing that his daughter had bestowed her hand upon a rich Birmingham manufacturer. He could not leave

Portalloc to the ownership of a Spinks! and Spinks père flatly refused to allow his patronymic to be altered to gratify a romantic prejudice. Spinks had been a good enough name for his father, he said, and Spinks ought to be good enough for Tom. Things consequently came to a deadlock with regard to the succession of Portalloc.

Well then, one day a brilliant idea occurred to the old man. It was his own idea entirely, and the version of the business which he had given to Mrs. Eardley had not been strictly true. It came into his mind to propose to Spinks père the double name and the marriage to his granddaughter. He clung, you see, desperately to Tom Spinks—not because he especially favored that young gentleman, but because of the untold thousands a year which it was morally certain he must one day inherit. With those thousands what might not be done for Portalloc! For their sake he was ready to compromise: the cousins might call themselves "Spinks-Eardley" if the difficulty could thus be solved. It was a gulp, of course, to swallow,—this concession to a plebeian pride in Britannia metal; but then the alternative was far worse. He might, of course, leave Tom out in the cold altogether,

and constitute Mab his sole heiress, but that left monetary matters pretty much as they were at present, and Mab—such was the perversity of young persons—might very possibly marry a pauper and have a large family, whose education would swallow up even that small margin which he himself had been able annually to devote to his Idol. No; on the whole it were better to secure Tom Spinks. Old Spinks fell into the trap; truth to say, he was secretly flattered, as Mr. Eardley knew he would be, by his father-in-law's suggestion. Money was, of course, the main thing in life, but he supposed that blood counted for something too, in that world out of which he had taken his Amabel, and to which he himself had virtually remained a stranger. Let the boy have the same advantage as himself then, and marry an Eardley of Portalloc. As to the double name, it was paltry certainly: but still, so long as the element of Britannia metal were not totally left out of the bargain, he would consent to overlook the tacking-on of the more distinguished patronymic to his own.

"Not that there's anything to be ashamed of in the name of Spinks!" he was careful to add stoutly. "I worked in the factory myself as a

mechanic for five years before I even got a lift. I began the world with half-a-crown in my pocket, and look at me now! I say I am proud of what I am to-day, and you can't say that there is an Eardley in creation that has ever done as much as a Spinks has. I'm proud of myself, sir, and of my name, as I have a right to be!"

He was certainly a very vulgar fellow! But for all his independence, Mr. Spinks was secretly pleased that the old man wanted his money along with his son. For your very rich man never resents being courted for his money. He is not in the least sensitive on this point. He likes to feel that he possesses something which you haven't got, and which is worth courting and bidding for, and he is not offended, but hugely delighted, at the implied tribute to his importance and consequence.

So he was magnanimous, and gave his consent to the scheme, whilst old Robert Eardley, like Annanias and Sapphira, kept back part of the spoil, and in his own mind, determined to leave Portalloc strictly entailed upon his granddaughter and her children, with only a life interest to his grandson.

Meanwhile, neither of the two gave a thought

to Tom and Mab, or troubled themselves to consider what their individual wishes might be in the matter. It was taken for granted that they would do as they were told.

CHAPTER VI.

It cannot be said that Mab looked forward much to the arrival of her unknown cousin and his father. Like her grandfather, the girl was inclined to turn up her nose at Britannia metal; and money in itself did not appeal in the least to her somewhat romantic imagination. The abhorred name of Spinks, too, was not attractive to her, and all her life she had wondered how her aunt Amabel had ever had the strength of mind to adopt it. Although she knew that her mother had loved her aunt Amabel dearly, Mab had always preserved a fine scorn for the poor lady, the scorn of youth and ignorance for something which she could not herself understand.

She had no special desire to make the acquaintance of the child of his mercenary union, and it rather annoyed her than otherwise that he was coming so soon to spoil the harmony of her new life.

With the enthusiasm of twenty she had fallen in love with the picturesque figure of her tall

old grandfather. She had expected to find him a stern, forbidding old man,—an intolerant autocrat, an unapproachable ogre, who would find constant fault with her, and terrify her, as he had evidently terrified her mother long ago.

Instead of this she had walked at once into the good graces of a kind and aristocratic-looking old gentleman who did not alarm her in the least, and who treated her with a marked kindness and indulgence. All unwittingly she had gone the best and shortest way to his heart when she had praised Portalloc. She had indeed no idea that she was propitiating him in this way, or that her perfectly spontaneous and girlish enthusiasm was the sweetest flattery which could possibly have fallen upon his ears. Mab had all her life been an enthusiast on the subject of old houses and ruined castles, and to find herself actually living in such a house, which combined every charm of romance and antiquity, was a real and positive delight to her.

"How is it, mother," she cried out at luncheon, after having wandered about the whole morning all over the house and ruins, "how is it that you never told me what a paradise Portalloc is?"

"You think it a paradise, then, Mab?" said the old man, smiling at her over his spectacles.

"It is heavenly! and all mother said of it beforehand when I questioned her about it, was that it was 'a queer, tumbledown place.' Fancy describing Portalloc like that! grandpapa has promised to take me after lunch to see the ruins of the Manor House in the woods," she ran on gaily; "the Manor House used to belong to the Castle once."

And accordingly by and by, Mr. Eardley mounted his old gray cob, and a rough pony having been brought round for Mab, the two started off together for their ride, the girl full of excitement and delight, and the old man beaming with pleasure and gratified vanity.

Mrs. Eardley spent the afternoon alone. She was anxious and troubled; events seemed to be shaping themselves without her will, and she felt powerless and uneasy. She could not but rejoice that Mab got on so well with her grandfather; for her own future was so clouded and uncertain, that the thought of his making her his heiress was naturally an intense satisfaction to her. But the condition which the old man had attached to his generous intentions, was a sore distress to her. Mrs. Eardley strongly

disapproved of the marriage of first cousins, and still more did she disapprove of the idea of influencing her daughter in any way in the matter. Mab was not the girl to take a husband at anybody's bidding. She had strong likes and dislikes; if she were to love a man, she might indeed be prepared to lose the whole world for his sake; but if she only tolerated him, or if she just found him pleasant and agreeable, and did not actually dislike him, she would certainly not bring herself to marry him upon a lukewarm affection, because by doing so she would reap any worldly advantage. Mrs. Eardley had brought up her child with simple and old-fashioned notions, and Mab had fallen into her mother's ideas with a quick, ready sympathy. Marriage to her meant love; and where she did not give her love, Mab would never marry.

The mother did not conceive it possible that Tom Spinks should inspire her child with a great passion, for she had heard that he did not resemble his mother, and surely no one who was like Joseph Spinks could have a chance of finding favor in Mab's critical eyes.

Mrs. Eardley had only seen Amabel Spinks once after her marriage, when she and her husband and her child, a chubby boy of about three

years old, had spent a few summer days with the Herbert Eardleys in their modest home in Essex, Mab being at the time an infant of a few months old only. Marion Eardley was not prepossessed by what she saw of Mr. Spinks. His bluff, if honest manner failed to please her; he was pompous and self-assertive, and she had wondered secretly how Amabel could ever have married him. Poor Amabel had grown thin and delicate; she seemed already to be fading away into the early grave which received her scarcely two years later, and Marion had always fancied that her sister-in-law had found out too late that she had made a mistake, and that this uncongenial marriage had shortened her life. As to the boy, she scarcely remembered him at all; but even then, he was not like his mother. Mrs. Eardley thought but dubiously of the chances of success of Mr. Eardley's matrimonial schemes.

"Of course the young man will very likely fall in love with Mab," she said to herself, with all a mother's partiality, "but there is not the remotest chance that Mab will fall in love with him—and then, if she refuses him, the old man will be angry!—there will be scenes and troubles, and perhaps he will turn us both out into the

world again, and what is to become of her when I am dead and gone!—" and she sighed deeply when she thought of the future.

Mab had not been long at Portalloc before she was filled with a desire to read the book—the great book, she called it—which her grandfather had written. She allowed him no peace until he had brought out the first of the great heavy volumes and placed it before her. It must be admitted that it did not take him many minutes to do this, and presently she was buried in it, her elbows on the table, her fingers driven up into her hair, her whole soul hundreds of years away amongst the early Portallocs, one or two of whose effigies she had seen in the tiny chapel, which was the only portion of the Manor House still left standing, and which had probably owed its escape at the time of the war to its secluded position in the heart of the woods. Evening after evening Mab buried herself in the pages of the heavy volumes, deaf and blind to all other sights and sounds. Her coffee would remain untasted by her side till it was cold, and the footman came back and carried it away. Mr. Eardley used to sit watching her furtively: he held his newspaper before his face and pretended to read. Every time she turned over a

page he experienced a keen sensation of pleasure and satisfaction. To be appreciated as an author was an additional stimulant to his newborn affection for Mab, and her genuine interest in Portalloc cemented his regard for her.

In the mornings he rode or walked with her, and was never tired of her artless girlish chatter.

And so the days slipped quickly and pleasantly away until the evening arrived on which his son-in-law and his grandson were expected. Mab sat reading as usual. She was not in the least anxious to see her unknown relatives. The silence was unbroken. Presently the tall clock in the hall struck seven, and almost at the same moment came the sound of wheels on the stones of the courtyard.

"They have come!" said Mr. Eardley, rising from his chair. "Mab, my dear, put away the book now your cousin has arrived!"

"What a bore!" said Mab, rising reluctantly; and her mother saw that she frowned, and displayed no eagerness whatever to meet the newcomers.

She had determined by this time to remain strictly neutral. She could not reconcile it to her conscience to do more than this.

"It will not take Mr. Eardley long to find

out that Mab won't look at Tom Spinks," she thought.

And as she thought it, Tom Spinks himself entered the room.

"I have come alone, after all, sir," he said to the old man, as he crossed the room briskly, and shook him warmly by the hand, and as he did so he looked neither to the left nor to the right of him. "My father couldn't get away; he was kept by unexpected business; I was to say how very sorry he was, but he will run down for a Sunday before I leave you."

"Well, Tom, I am at any rate very glad to see you, and I suppose your father could not help it," added Mr. Eardley, dismissing the topic with a somewhat contented alacrity; "and now let me introduce you anew to your aunt, Mrs. Herbert Eardley—who saw you as a child, and to your cousin Mabel, whom I believe you have never seen at all." And then Tom Spinks shook hands, somewhat formally, first with his aunt and then with his cousin.

CHAPTER VII.

"You must throw from your wrist—not from your shoulder—you'll never get your line out if you don't! Try again."

Scene—the tumbling trout stream that rustles down the valley through the cleft in the wooded hills behind Portalloc. *Dramatis personæ*—Mr. Tom Spinks and Miss Amabel Eardley.

"It all seems to get tangled up together, Tom, and then it won't go any further out."

"That's because you cast from your shoulder; use your wrist more—see, this way;" and swish, swish went the cast straight as a die across the dark pool.

"How beautifully you do it! See, you have got one. Oh—h!"

A moment of breathless suspense, the pliant rod is drawn into a curve, the reel gyrates rapidly with that quick raking sound that is the most poetical of all noises in a fisherman's ear, and that does in truth harmonize with a

singular felicity with the sound of rustling water and all the sweet undertones of the summer air—then Tom, breathless and absorbed, plays his fish; presently a rush, a struggle, a silvery shape that dashes for one second out of the brown water into the air, then plunges back in a last hopeless effort, as nearer and nearer the sportsman draws his victim—then in a suppressed whisper:

"The landing-net, Mab! quick, quick!" Mab is already stretching it out, at the peril of her life, and to the wetting of her little brown shoes—over the pool. "That's right, that's a good girl, now—now! By Jove! he must weigh a pound!"

And there at last lies the fat brown trout wriggling and struggling in the meshes of the net.

"That was very well landed, Mab!" says Tom approvingly, as he proceeds to extract the fly and to deal violent death to the hapless fish. Mab turns shuddering away to avoid the final scene, but her eyes are shining bright and warm with pleasure at the approving words.

"How clever you are at it!" she says presently, whilst Tom is readjusting her line; "directly you took my rod you caught some-

thing. Shall I ever catch a fish all by myself, I wonder?"

"Lot's of 'em!" says Tom, reassuringly, with his eyes on the cast. "I'm not sure I won't put you on a Zulu besides," he adds, meditatively.

"Oh, but there are two flies already, and I can't manage one properly yet—don't you think I'd better be content?"

"Never be content with anything in this world," answers Tom oracularly; "besides, it's no more difficult to throw three flies than one. Reach us the fly-book; there's a good girl."

"The worst of it is," continues Mab, as she stands watching his operations attentively, "that it makes my arm ache so awfully."

"I know. That is because your rod is much too heavy for you; it's a lumbering old-fashioned thing too. I dare say it's the best that grandfather could rummage out for you from the archives of the past, but it's quite unfit for a lady. I've sent to London for a new one for you."

"Tom—you've sent to London? Oh, Tom!" gasps Mab, breathlessly, and her face flushes, her eyes flash with keenest delight; then, as she turns away, they fill suddenly with some-

thing else, as she adds in a lower voice and a little unsteadily: "It is very, very good of you!"

"Not at all. I undertook to teach you fly-fishing, and I think the least I can do is to provide you with proper tackle, so I've ordered you the very best ladies' rod that can be got."

"How am I to thank you, Tom?"

"By learning to use it properly. You'll get on much better when it comes, which it ought to do to-morrow or the next day. Meanwhile, it won't do you any harm to practise with this heavy old affair of grandfather's; it all teaches you. Now catch hold and throw out your line once more. Aim at that rock the other side of the pool; you'll get a rise there very likely. Here, let me show you."

And then Tom comes close behind her and rests her elbow under his, and takes hold of her wrist with his hand so that it is he who plies the rod really; and out goes the fly under his guidance and drops into the water close to the brown rock on the further side of the pool. And during this operation Mab's slender figure, in its pretty brown holland skirt and jacket, is swayed back against the sturdy figure of her cousin Tom, so that just for that brief moment it is as though she is resting in his arms.

"Now, do it by yourself," remarked Tom, tranquilly, as he moved away from her. "And try to let your tail fly touch the water first." And then he walked himself away to his own rod higher up the stream.

But Mab was strangely silent for a long time after that.

It will be seen that the cousins were by this time on very fair terms of intimacy together. Tom Spinks had now been at Portalloc rather more than ten days, and from the first Mab had liked him.

True, he was not in the least like the Eardleys, who were all tall and slight, whilst Tom, on the contrary, was somewhat short and broad in figure; he was indeed scarcely an inch taller than Mab. But he was not an ill-looking young fellow for all that; he looked strong and manly to begin with, and then he had a jolly round face and a laughing mouth, and such frank, merry blue eyes that it was quite a pleasure to meet them. It was true enough that he was like his father, but he was a decided improvement upon him, and it was always to his advantage when his father was not by his side to suggest an invidious similarity. And so, as Mab had nobody to compare him with, Tom

appeared to her solely upon his own merits. He was a person whom it was extremely easy to get on with. He was always quite simple and natural, and he never pretended to be anything but what he was. He was not in the least well read or clever, and he frankly admitted this to Mab.

"I am afraid I've been an idle dog all my life," he told her. "I hate books, and that's a fact. I wasted all my time at Eton; the only things I learnt there were to row and to play cricket; even at that I am no good at batting, but I used to be thought a decent bowler. Then at Oxford it was the same thing—cricket and the boats—nothing else. I managed to scrape through 'Smalls,' and was plowed twice for 'Mod's,' and just pulled through the third time by the skin of my teeth. As for 'Finals,' it would have been a perfectly hopeless attempt to get me through them, so my father very kindly removed me just in time to avoid the ignominy of total failure. But I had a very good time at Oxford all the same, made lots of friends, and enjoyed myself thoroughly."

But if he knew nothing of books, Tom was proficient enough in all sorts of sports and games, and this proficiency had always made

him popular amongst a class of people with whom his father and his father's friends had never been brought into contact. His keen eagerness on all subjects connected with flood and field was very interesting to Mab. She had met several young men at her old home, and had been to two balls in the country town in which they had lived, so that the race was not quite unknown to her. But hitherto no young man precisely like Tom had ever come into her life. After a few days all her preconceived notions and prejudices against him began to melt away and vanish. She forgot that he was wealthy with the sordid and ignoble wealth bred of Britannia metal; she even forgot that he bore the horrible name of Spinks, and that his father had begun life as a common mechanic. She found him a pleasant companion—fresh frank, and unconventional—and somehow life became a different thing to her altogether—it was impossible to put it into words, and she could not have told the why or the wherefore, only she felt that Tom's advent added a deeper and keener zest to every trivial event of her existence.

Tom himself had never indulged in any fancies or imaginations concerning Mab before-

hand. He was not given to speculations concerning the unknown, and he had not troubled himself much about her. He had always thought it a pity, certainly, that he and his only cousin on his mother's side should remain strangers, and he was very glad when he heard that she and her mother were staying at Portalloc, and that he should meet them there on his annual visit to his grandfather. As he told her, it was deadly dull at Portalloc, with nobody there but the old man.

"Grandfather is a good old boy, but you know I never got on with him very well. He is so somber, and frowns at me so, he used to alarm me horribly when I was a small boy."

"I believe my mother is frightened of him to this hour!" laughed Mab; "but oddly enough I got on with him directly; he seemed to like me at once, I think, and I never find him alarming at all."

"You see you are such a jolly little girl!" said Tom. "It certainly makes all the difference in the world to me your being here," he added, after a minute. And Mab, who had been vaguely disturbed at the easy friendliness of the first portion of his sentence, felt reassured and comforted by the conclusion.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE morning—it was the very day that the new fishing-rod arrived from London, and just after Tom and Mab had set forth as happy as two children with their new toy, carrying sandwiches and two bottles of ginger beer in the basket, in order to lunch *al fresco* upon the margin of a somewhat distant part of the river—Mrs. Eardley tapped softly at the library door, and went up to the writing-table where the old man was opening his morning correspondence.

"Ah!" he said, looking up quickly at her as she came in, "you have come to report progress, Marion? How are things going on?"

"Very well, I think, Mr. Eardley; it seems to me indeed that your wishes are in a fair way of being carried out."

"You have spoken to Mab, then?"

"Oh no; certainly not. I would not speak to her for the world! it might spoil everything."

"Well, I don't see the use of shilly-shallying. I want this matter settled, Marion; it must be settled soon, in fact. And what is there to wait for, pray?"

"We must wait till the young people grow to know each other better—till it comes naturally, in fact," said Mrs. Eardley, smiling.

"Why, God bless my soul! they have had lots of time for that; they are out together morning, noon, and night. Mab has quite deserted me now. What's the meaning of it, if they aren't making up to one another?"

"It is wiser not to hurry things. Did you know that Tom has given her a fishing-rod? it arrived this morning."

"Oh, it was a present from Tom, was it? Well, I suppose that is a pretty clear evidence of his admiration of her."

"Oh, of course, Tom admires Mab! How could it be otherwise? But what is more wonderful to me, Mr. Eardley, is, that I verily believe that Mab has fallen in love with Tom—that is really far more than I ventured to expect—indeed, it is almost incomprehensible to me even now."

"How do you know it? did the child tell you so?"

"Oh no, Mr. Eardley! how can you suppose that Mab would speak even to me on such a topic? No, I found it out by myself."

"How?"

"I will tell you. It was last night. I was up very late, as I often am; but just before going to bed, I stole on tiptoe into Mab's room to give her a kiss in her bed. When I got into her room, I found that although the candles were not lit, she was not in bed. A flood of moonlight poured from the open window into the room, making it as light as day, and there, outside on the little iron balcony overlooking the sea, stood Mab fully dressed, watching some object across the bay through her opera-glasses. I crept close to her, and she did not see me, and presently she dropped the glasses, and there was such a strange wrapt dreamy look on her face! —a lovely dawning happiness in her eyes and smile—such as I had never seen there before. I spoke her name softly, and she turned with a start. I asked her what she was looking at, and why she had not gone to bed, and she laughed a little, quite softly, before she spoke, and then she said with a slight effort:

"'It is only that I am watching for Tom to come back. He has gone out with the fisher-

man to lay some night lines in the bay, and he told me to be sure and watch for him from my window; he said it would bring him luck if I did. The boat is coming back now; as soon as she is safe in, I will go to bed.' And it was love that shone in Mab's eyes as she spoke!"

"That all sounds very pretty and sentimental," grumbled Mr. Eardley; "but really, Marion, if that is all you have got to go upon——"

"*All?*—why, is it not enough that a girl like my Mab should be sitting up half the night watching a boat a mile away across the sea, just because the young man who was in it asked her to do so? I consider it a great deal, Mr. Eardley. Mab, so proud, so cold as she has always been, so indifferent to all young men; and really it passes my understanding now what she can see in Tom Spinks, who is a very ordinary young man, I think. I suppose 'love begets love,' and she has been touched by his evident infatuation for her."

"Well, I don't suppose you regret it, do you, since it is exactly what we wanted?"

"It is what *you* wanted, certainly," amended Mrs. Eardley; and then as her father-in-law glanced sharply at her, she added quickly: "I

daresay it is all for the best; I will try to believe it is, and to reconcile myself to this marriage, but I did not think that Mab would have been so easily won."

"Well, as it seems that she has been won, why on earth don't we have it out with them? What is the use of waiting?"

"Leave them a little longer, I beg of you, sir; I feel sure he has not spoken to her yet. She would have told me if he had; do not precipitate matters;" and in her own heart the mother thought, "Mab is young and impressionable, she might change her mind yet." Then catching a look of impatience and displeasure upon her father-in-law's face, she hastened to say: "Everything is going on so well, they are quite inseparable; do you notice in the evenings how they play chess and backgammon together? or how Mab helps him to tie flies?"

"I notice that she has left off studying the *History of Portalloc by its present owner*," remarked Mr. Eardley with a grim little smile. "However, I don't complain of that; she'll take it up again, no doubt, by and bye, when the love-making has cooled down. Well, it shall be as you advise, Marion, and we will let them

alone a few days longer, but Joe Spinks will be here for a Sunday soon, and I mean to get Mr. Graves, my solicitor, to come down for a few days whilst he is here; so we must get the engagement definitely settled by the time they come, as I shall have a great many new arrangements to make connected with their marriage, and I confess I shall be very thankful to get everything fixed—it will be a great weight off my mind, Marion. I have felt much anxiety about the future lately;" and when he spoke of "the future," it was the future of Portalloc which he meant.

"I don't think you need be anxious any more, sir; I think it will all turn out as you desire," she replied soothingly.

"Well, well, I hope so, I hope so, but there's often a slip, you know, and I do think you might have put the pressure on more with your girl."

"I told you, sir, I would not, and could not try to persuade my child to marry any man she does not love. Mab will never be influenced by anything but her own heart. I myself do not approve of the marriage of cousins; but if Mab's heart is set upon her cousin, no objections of mine will weigh an iota with her. However,

I have remained neutral, and you cannot complain of me, Mr. Eardley, for, you see, I have come to you at once to give to you what I know you consider the good news, that I believe Mab's affections to have been engaged by her cousin."

"And you think also that Tom is in love with her?"

"Certainly I do. There cannot be the smallest doubt about that! He never leaves her side, and his attentions to her are unremitting. How could any young man be constantly in the society of such a girl as Mab without falling in love with her? It would be impossible, and in fact it is plain to the meanest understanding that Tom adores her!"

"That's as it should be, then. And I imagine, then, that we need not anticipate any hitch in the matter?"

"Not the slightest, I should say," answered Mrs. Eardley rather sadly.

Yet away upon the banks of the river, up amongst the hills, words had been spoken already that dashed all this fine castle in the air to the ground; and Mab Eardley had been roughly awaked out of her first fair dream of love, to discover how dark and how bitter life can sometimes become all in one moment of time.

CHAPTER IX.

"THIS is the most heavenly day the world has ever seen!" breathed Mab, with the rapture of utter contentment.

"It's a nice day, certainly, for the first of June," replied the more prosaic Tom, "though not particularly good for fishing—much too bright."

"It's never a good day for fishing, apparently!" laughed Mab. "Yesterday it was too rough, the day before there was thunder in the air, and I am not sure but that you called the day before that too still—you said there wasn't ripple enough on the water! And really, considering that I have just caught my first trout all by myself with my new rod—I can't see how you can call it a bad day for fishing;" and Mab eyed the small corpse of the slimy victim of her prowess with the fondest pride and satisfaction, as it lay prone by her side upon the mossy bank. "What does he weigh, do you suppose?—a pound?"

"Something under a quarter, I fancy!" replied Tom, with remorseless accuracy—"he ought by rights to have been thrown in again."

"Oh, Tom! my first trout! how cruel of you!"

"Well, well, I remembered that, Mab, so I let you keep him," replied Tom, indulgently, "but it isn't form to keep little bits of things three inches long."

"Ham or beef sandwiches?" broke in Mab, peremptorily, in order to change the subject, "and do open the ginger beer, I am so thirsty."

Was ever picnic so delightful as this one! They sat together upon the mossy bole of a giant oak; all around them were the deep and leafy woods, sunflecked betwixt their fluttering branches: before them lay the river, gurgling and murmuring through its rocks; away beyond it was the pale gray-blue of the distant hills, with the deep purple of the sea lying like a burnished plain betwixt the encircling curves of the bay. And there, beneath their very feet, as it were, lay Portalloc, frowning and stern even in the soft June sunshine, but as beautiful and romantic from above as it was from below,—for Portalloc was always beautiful, under every aspect and from every point of view.

A snowy napkin was spread on the grass be-

tween them, on which lay their modest lunch—sandwiches and a slice of plum cake apiece, and the ginger beer. Yet the richest banquet a millionaire could have set before her could not have seemed more temptingly recherché to Mab.

"That fool of a footman has only put in one tumbler!" cried Tom, ferreting amongst the papers in the creel. "We shall have to share!" he added, with annoyance; "what an idiot he is! I am so sorry, Mab."

"I am not at all sorry, Tom," said Mab, softly. "I don't mind sharing in the least—in fact—I—I rather like it."

And then she blushed rosy red, and wondered if she had said too much. She glanced timidly at Tom. He was pouring out the ginger beer, and when he had filled the tumbler, he handed it to her without looking at her. Mab's heart sank a little. Did he disapprove of her, then? did he think her forward, unmaidenly? And then Tom spoke.

"I'm just thinking," he said, meditatively, "that it's no good our going on here after lunch, as the sun is so hot; if we could get up to that little lake on the hill, we might have a better chance, and then we might work down the river again in the cool of the afternoon." He had

evidently not heard her stupid remark! "I should like you to bring home something better than that little wretched thing!" he continued, indicating Mab's trout, which to her was the finest trout in the world, with a contemptuous finger. "I'll alter your flies for you after lunch. By Jove!" stretching himself back upon the mossy slope, and taking out his pipe, "it is a jolly day, and no mistake! Will it distress you, Miss Eardley, if I smoke and otherwise behave like a boor?"

"Nothing that you can say or do will distress me to-day, Tom," she answered, softly; "I am too happy!"

"Are you happy?" said Tom, rolling himself over on to his chest, and looking up at her. "I am very glad of that. I like people to be happy, just as I like to be happy myself. Would it surprise you to hear, Mab, that I am very happy too to day?"

"Are you, Tom?" nervously plucking at the soft mosses under her hand. "What makes you happy?"

"You tell me first, and then perhaps I'll tell you. I meant to go to sleep, which would have been decidedly unpolite, but now I'll keep awake, and we will each make confession of our

mental condition. Your turn first; what makes you happy?"

"Oh—the weather—and my new rod—and the trout I have caught—and—and—oh, lots of other things," answered Mab, vaguely.

"Very insufficient causes for joy, Miss Eardley. Mine are much more definite!"

"Tell me them, Tom."

A little pause. Tom looked away over the dancing river with a dreamy little smile which sat somewhat queerly on his honest and thoroughly practical countenance, but apparently his mood had become sentimental.

"Shall I really tell you, Mab?" he said softly, turning towards her again. Mab's eyes were averted, her heart was beating, her lower lip trembled, a burning blush crept swiftly over her rounded cheeks, for she told herself that she loved him, and it seemed to her that now had come to her that supremest moment of a woman's life, when he whom she loves asks for the confession of that love.

"I don't know why I shouldn't tell you," said Tom, gently. "I have never told anybody about it, because I promised I wouldn't, but I think I might tell you, you and I are such pals. I think you are the best friend a man ever had,

and I feel sure you can keep a secret, can't you, Mab?"

She looked up startled. There was a bewildered expression in her eyes, and a little of the carmine faded suddenly from her cheeks and lips.

"A secret?" she repeated, wonderingly; "is it to be a secret then?"

"A *dead* secret, Mab. You must promise me that."

"Of course, Tom, I will promise anything you like," a little hurriedly.

"Well, then, the reason I am happy to-day, specially and extra happy, is because I got something delightful by post this morning."

"By post!" she repeated stupidly. She thought about her rod, Tom's gift to her, but somehow this thought did not seem to fit in at all.

"I am going to show you that delightful 'something,' Mab, for I should like to hear what you say to it."

Then with great care and deliberation he drew a small flat parcel wrapped in silver paper out of his inner breast coat pocket. With reverent hands he removed the silver paper and displayed a flat blue silk case, embroidered with pink

roses of a somewhat crude design and coloring; this he again opened and laid upon Mab's lap.

It contained a photograph.

Mab took it up in both hands. She had an odd sort of feeling that unless she held it with her two hands she would be unable to hold it at all, they were so cold, so icy cold; and yet the day was warm, and the June sunshine was flickering down through the branches upon her head.

CHAPTER X.

"WELL, do you like it?" he asked, impatiently, when he had waited a minute or two for her to speak.

"Do I like it?" she repeated. How stupid to keep on repeating his words like that!

She pulled herself together with a violent effort. After all it might mean nothing. Anybody might have a photograph sent to them; girls, especially pretty girls, did sometimes send their portraits to young men, and nothing was thought of it.

"Don't you think it beautiful, Mab?" persisted Tom.

"It is Dorothy Duke," said Mab, quietly. Tom sprang from a recumbent into a sitting posture, as though he had been shot.

"*What!*" he cried, "you know her, Mab? you know her?"

"I know her very well. I was at the Ladies' College in Townchester with her; that is where we lived, you know. And she lives at her uncle's, five miles from Townchester."

"Of course, of course, I remember! and yet it is really wonderful when one comes to think of it! And have you ever seen her since those days, Mab?"

"Frequently. I see her very often."

"My dearest Mab! how perfectly delightful!" cried Tom with ecstasy, and he caught hold of both her hands and wrung them warmly, "this is indeed good news! that you and she should be friends! why, what could be better? How glad I am I told you about her. If there was one woman on earth I should have liked Dorothy to have for a friend, it is you, my dear little cousin! Don't you"—picking up the silk case again and gazing rapturously at it—"don't you think she is the most perfectly lovely creature you ever saw?"

A little pause—the face in the photograph smiled up at him—it was a very beautiful face indeed, framed in by masses of blonde hair, the eyes large and limpid, the mouth curved like a Cupid's bow, and a little dimple that cleft the chin beneath it in twain. A face to rave over, to set the world aflame; a face, too, to break a good man's heart, was the face of Dorothy Duke.

"Say something, for goodness' sake, Mab,"

said Tom, with a little irritation. "Why, you look quite taken aback; and yet if you know her, you must know also that this photograph is not half good enough for her; it cannot give her lovely coloring, her changeful and radiant expression, her beautiful smile; it is a mere caricature of her, really. Surely you must admit that?"

"It does not do her justice at all," assented Mab, dully; and then suddenly she took her fate in both hands and turned to him. She knew it, of course, and yet surely it were better to meet the blow and have done with it! Gone was the bright blush that had so lately warmed her cheek, gone the happy smile, the warm glow in the dancing eyes. Mab only looked a pale, wan, and almost a plain girl just now. But Tom saw no difference in her; he was still gloating over the photograph.

"Tom, what is Dorothy Duke to you?"

"Why, Mab, can't you guess? of course she almost belongs to me,"—with a little happy laugh—"she has promised to be my wife."

How black the trees have suddenly grown, how dull and ugly the rushing river; why, even the sunshine seems to have paled into a sickly yellow! Has all the world turned rotten

and unhealthy? What has happened to the beautiful June day?

"You mean—that—she intends to marry you?"

"Certainly she does. Do I not tell you that she has promised? we are engaged. Mab, you look stupefied! Aren't you pleased that I am going to marry your friend? Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

The last question broke up the hard dull stone that seemed to have settled in her heart; her eyes filled with tears. "Dear Tom, yes, of course I congratulate you. I hope, indeed, that you will be happy, from my heart I hope it. I was only—so—so surprised—and then you must not think that I am a great friend of Dorothy Duke's, although I have known her for years; we are perhaps hardly friends, only just acquaintances, I think."

"Well, you'll have to become friends now, Mab!" said Tom, gaily. "Oh, how delightful it is too have found somebody I can talk to about her! it's really awful to have such a secret on one's soul! I don't think I am a good hand at keeping secrets!"

"Why, is it such a secret? does not your father know?"

"Not a soul knows but our two selves, and

now you. She won't have it. You see she lives with her uncle, and he would not give his consent to our marriage."

"Oh!" and Mab's eyes opened wide; "I always thought he wanted to get her married, because of his own daughter."

"That's all a mistake, she tells me," said Tom, confidently; "people say that sort of thing without knowing anything about it. Her uncle would not think me a good enough match, it seems."

"Why on earth? surely you are good enough for any woman, Tom!" warmly.

"Oh! I know, I shall have a good bit of money, but money isn't everything, Mab; not to people like the Dukes. There's my father, you see, poor dear chap! he's a good sort enough, but I am afraid he can't be called exactly a gentleman; and then there's my horrible surname, which my governor says I am never to change. If I do, he swears he will leave every shilling to a cousin of mine, Walter Spinks, an awful bounder, and cut me out of his will altogether; and you see I shall have to go into the business some day, I am afraid, and that would be a fine sort of position to drag a beautiful creature like Dorothy down to!"

"And you mean to tell me that for paltry reasons like these, Dorothy Duke is afraid to own her engagement to her uncle? How is she going to keep it, then?"

"Oh, it will all come right in time, of course, only we must wait and be patient; *she* wouldn't object to anything herself, God bless her! but you see her people are so proud. However, she says she is sure to be able to persuade her uncle into it by degrees; only for the present it must remain an absolute secret; no one on earth must know, so I am sure I can depend on you, Mab."

"Of course you can, Tom."

"I am afraid Dorothy may be vexed at my having told you; but if I tell her what a real comfort and blessing it has been to me to open my heart to you, I am sure she will forgive me; besides, you could be such a good friend to us both, I am thinking."

"I will always be a good friend to you, Tom," replied Mab softly, but she did not look at him as she said the words.

"Well!" said Tom, rising with a half sigh, "one mustn't sit all day talking sentiment, I suppose; that's not the way to catch a fish! Come along, Mab, let's get up to that lake and

have a try for the trout there; it's only about a mile and a half away."

"If you won't mind, Tom, I think I won't go so far; it's hot, you see, and I'm a little tired, I think, and——"

"Gracious, what's come to you! A little while ago you were as keen as mustard about it, and you are getting on so well, too. You'll throw a very good line in time if you persevere; come on, lazy!"

"I'd really rather stay here; I—I think I had rather fish the same pool again; I had a rise just before lunch, just in that broken water below the rocks; it was quite a big fish, I think, didn't I tell you?" How easily the ready lie came into her aching head. "I think I ought to stop here and see if I can catch him."

"Oh, very well, then, if you think you can. *I* don't think you'll do any good in this pool till the sun begins to go down; but you've grown cheeky, miss, since you've caught a trout all by yourself, and I suppose you think you know better than your teacher! Well, I'm off to the lake; you'd better keep the landing-net; I can do without it. I'll work my way down again to you. Take pains," he shouted back, "and use your wrist, and mind you get out your tail

fly." The injunctions died faintly away in the distance, as Tom disappeared up hill amongst the trunks of the trees.

Mab did not move. She sat quite still for a long time after he had left her, with her arms clasped round her knees and her eyes fixed vacantly on the tumbling river in front of her; and her rod lay idle and unheeded by her side.

CHAPTER XI.

It was really not more than an hour later, although it seemed to Mab to be much longer, when she roused herself from her reverie and rose slowly to her feet. She felt stiff and cramped and oddly cold, although the sun was as bright and warm as ever.

There was no sign of Tom coming back. Mab picked up her rod. It gave her a stab of pain when her eyes fell upon it, and a little shiver shot through her as she began deliberately to take it to pieces, carefully and painstakingly, as Tom had taught her to do, pushing in the stops, and putting each joint back into its division of the canvas cover, and the reel into her pocket.

"I must not be foolish in any way," she said to herself half aloud. "He must never, never find out the terrible mistake I have made. I am afraid I have not been very wise or clever in hiding it, but it was such a shock;" and there was a piteous quiver for a moment at the corners of her mouth. "But now," drawing herself up a little, "I am quite brave and strong,

and I have not shed a tear, not one. And when we meet again, I must be his bright, jolly little cousin once more. He *is* fond of me! Oh yes, I know he is; would he have told me his secret if he were not? And, after all, how can I blame him: he loved her first, long before he knew me. He was only sweet, and dear, and kind to me, just as Tom would always be to any woman —old or young. It was all my own fault that I mistook it for something else, my own fault and my own folly! But he must never find it out—never! I should die if he knew it! I must be just the same to him—his friend, his 'pal,' he called me."

By this time she was walking down-hill, along the course of the river. She felt she could not stop to see him again, just yet, that was impossible; she must have a little breathing space, a few hours to recover; by dinner-time she would be herself again. If only it had not been Dorothy Duke! Mab thought she remembered more than one unfortunate to whom Miss Duke had been at divers times "engaged"; there was even a story—of the truth of which, however, she could not exactly vouch—of her having been once engaged to two gentlemen at the same time! Beautiful as she was, Mab knew with an

unerring instinct that Dorothy was not good enough for Tom; she was unworthy of his love. That was what hurt her worst of all. It must be for his money that she had accepted him! And then she caught herself up indignantly; how wicked and unjust she was! Dorothy was a flirt, but she might not be totally heartless. Why could she not believe her to be honestly in love with Tom, just as she herself was? Mab told herself that Miss Duke must love him. Nobody could be loved by Tom and remain indifferent to him! Only, why did she trump up all those little stories about the opposition of her uncle and the necessity for silence?

Mab happened to know a great deal about the private history of the Dukes,—a great deal more than a girl is generally supposed to know, or than she could possibly have talked about.

Captain Duke, R. N., Dorothy's uncle, now retired from the service, had adopted his niece on his brother's death. Dorothy had great beauty but no fortune, and her father had been the family black sheep. Captain Duke had promised his brother, when he saw him on his death-bed, that he would give his daughter a home until she married. It was pretty well known that Captain and Mrs. Duke were ex-

tremely anxious that Dorothy should find a husband, and that quickly, so as to be well out of the way of their own daughter, who was a few years her junior, and who was neither so beautiful nor so clever as her cousin. But in spite of her beauty Miss Duke still remained single. Some people said it was her own fault, whilst others who knew of the family skeleton, were inclined to ascribe it to the story of her parents. Her mother, it was said, was of humble birth, and had never been her father's wife.

This was the blot upon Dorothy's origin, the fatal barrier to the brilliant marriage which it was the dream of her life to make. When the possible suitors, who were in every way desirable, came to make inquiries about her, they learnt that she had no right to the name of Duke. Men of good family fought shy of marrying her; and as to the others, those who were genuinely in love with her, and who were willing to overlook the stain upon her birth—there had been plenty of these, too—but Dorothy was ambitious, and although it amused her to make conquests of these gentlemen, she had no intention of throwing herself away on any one of them, unless he had sufficient money and position to gratify her somewhat inordinate desires.

Mab had heard all these things very often, for Townchester was a gossipping country town and its inhabitants were very fond of talking about their neighbors' concerns. Nevertheless, she had nothing certain to go upon, for, as she had told Tom, there existed no intimacy between Miss Duke and herself; only she saw her, as others did, always surrounded by an ever-shifting crowd of men, each of whom in his turn worshiped and adored her for a brief space, until he retired discomfited, only to be supplanted by the next arrival on the scenes.

As far as Mab knew there was no harm in all this—only—only—it was surely not good enough for Tom!

But during her homeward walk, Mab took herself severely to task, and determined to lay aside resolutely all unkind thoughts and prejudices against Dorothy Duke. Many a flirt, she knew, has blossomed into an excellent wife and mother, and there was no earthly reason why a strong affection should not transform the beautiful Dorothy into a faithful and loving woman. Only why did she not own her engagement bravely and openly! That was the suspicious element which she could not entirely cast out.

Presently, as she came down the steep path

through the woods, she saw her grandfather, leaning upon his stick, coming up the incline towards her, and behind him, in a fitting background to his tall and picturesque old figure, were all the ruined walls and battlements, the ivied towers and sightless mullioned windows of Portalloc. Somehow in that moment, Mab's heart warmed strangely towards the old man and his beautiful Castle; there could be no mistake about these things, no downfall of impossible dreams here.

She ran down the path to meet him.

"What, home already, Mab!" he exclaimed and he certainly looked glad to see her. "And where is your cousin, pray?"

"Tom has gone up to the Lake—it was rather too far for me; I was lazy, and so I have come home. See, grandpapa, I have caught one little trout!" and she opened the basket and displayed her spoil. She spoke quite brightly and gaily, as though no tempest of emotion had lately swept across her heart.

"This fish requires a magnifying glass to discover," said Mr. Eardley, with amusement, as he peered into the basket. "Have you had a happy day, my dear? You like Tom, don't you?" he added.

'Very much indeed! grandpapa." He glanced at her keenly. Mab was looking straight in front of her.

"Ah," he said, musingly, "you and he are my only descendants, Mab; I am glad you should be fond of each other, and fond of Portalloc."

"I love Portalloc."

"You would like to live and die here, Mab, as I have done?"

"I can imagine no happier fate."

"And your cousin? Would Tom also like to live and die at Portalloc, do you think?"

For a moment Mab was silent; a glimmer of the idea that was in her grandfather's mind broke in upon her; she winced a little; it was like a rough touch upon a raw wound.

"I don't know," she answered, slowly; "men are so different, grandpapa; young men like to see the world, to travel, to be in the fight of life. Tom might not care to settle down for always in one quiet country place, although perhaps, if some day he were to marry, he might be happy enough to come here often—as often as you invited him, I mean," she added, a little confusedly.

"Well, but how if his wife wanted to live here always?"

"His wife would not want to live here," she answered quickly with a sudden blush, and again she felt her grandfather's keen eyes fixed upon her piercingly and inquiringly.

Yet he said nothing more at the moment, only he pondered over her answer a good deal. It puzzled him.

CHAPTER XII.

UNDER the white awning on the deck of a find two hundred ton schooner yacht, a beautiful girl lay back in a low wicker chair eating strawberries and cream. A youth with stubbly red hair and a nascent mustache, dressed in a white linen suit, sat on a stool by her side, patiently holding out the plate of strawberries for her, whilst another man, picturesquely attired in a rather too bright blue serge suit with a soft gray Tyrolese felt hat on his curly head, reclined in a not ungraceful attitude at her feet.

At some distance, an elderly couple sat side by side, also on wicker chairs, he deep in the newspaper, she apparently engaged in an elaborate piece of woolwork, although at every moment she cast looks of disgust and disapproval over the edge of her spectacles towards the trio under the awning. Below, from the main saloon, the sound of a piano arose, faintly borne upon the breeze, and then presently a yet more terrible sound, as a voice somewhat thin and

nasal, and considerably out of tune, uplifted itself in the deliberate murder of Tosti's "Serenade." The girl under the awning gave a sensational shiver, the man at her feet murmured "Mon Dieu!" and rolled over on to his face as though in mortal agony, whilst the holder of the strawberry plate remarked softly, in a set little voice that seemed to indicate an orderly mind,—

"I am often very thankful that it has not pleased Providence to bestow upon me an ear for music."

At the same moment, the elderly lady at the other side of the deck was saying to the elderly gentleman: "Listen to that dear girl! so industrious, so persevering in her studies! it is a pity that your niece does not follow her example, instead of wasting her whole life flirting in that shameful fashion with young men, and doing absolutely nothing to improve her mind or occupy herself! How nice Florence's singing sounds!—sweet music mingling with the music of the waves!"

Captain Duke lowered *The Times* for a minute, not to listen to his daughter's strident soprano voice, but to look uneasily towards his niece.

"If only it would end in marriage, in any sort of marriage!" he murmured. "You see, my dear, we shall do nothing at all with Florence until that girl is out of the way, and there are the younger girls growing up fast. But Dorothy is far too good-looking. Once married, our poor Florence will get her chances."

"She is such a shocking flirt!" replied his wife, angrily; "look at her now, both men at her feet! And what does it all mean? just nothing at all! they have no serious intentions. Who wants a wife like Dorothy?"

"My love, there must be some fools in the world! I certainly believe we have got two on board now."

"Oh! little Lord Melton might be taken in by her certainly, poor boy. He hasn't got any brains to speak of, and he is only twenty-one, and has no parents to look after him; but I doubt if she will have him; he is ugly, you see, and much too young."

"I have ascertained that she likes them young," replied Captain Duke, seriously; "more easily gulled, I imagine! Do you remember that young fellow in the winter? what was his name, Sparks, Spokes? some such terrible name, she made a pretty fool of him. I

really did think that would have come off. I heard he would have money, a good lot of money, but I suppose she got tired [illegible] like all the others."

"I can't say; she may be keeping him in the background as a *pis aller*, you know; that's her way; anyhow, for the present he has disappeared. Lord Melton might be a better thing for her; there's the title, you see, and I suppose he must have enough to keep a wife; all peers can't be paupers! I shouldn't really have minded him for Florence, but," with a sigh of resignation, "I suppose it's no use thinking about poor Florence till Dorothy is married! Oh dear, what a bad day it was for us when she was left upon your hands! how I wish you could have got out of it!"

"Well, well, it's no use thinking of that now. I promised poor Jim on his death-bed to give her a home. I gave him my oath. I've got to keep it, you know; but cheer up, old woman, Florence is only seventeen, and Dorothy is bound to marry somebody soon; perhaps she will take up seriously with this young lordling during this very cruise."

"If that was your object, why on earth did you invite that Frenchman too?" rejoined his

wife, rather irritably. "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick," and the poor lady had so often believed that [illegible] the cuckoo was to be ejected from her nest, and so often had been disappointed, that she was by this time almost weary of hope.

"As to the Frenchman, he invited himself, I believe!" replied Captain Duke, with a good-natured laugh; "or perhaps it was Dorothy who invited him, I really am not quite sure; I fancy they settled it between themselves, and it's giving her two chances anyhow instead of one."

"But Monsieur de Vernet is a poor man, I am told; these Embassy attachés are so often only younger sons; and as to his being a Count, why, all foreigners seem to have titles, and precious little else, as far as I can see!"

"Well, she flirts outrageously with him, and that may serve to bring Melton up to the scratch," replied Captain Duke, sagaciously; for this old gentleman, by dint of long observation, had become remarkably acute and clever in the matters of the heart, much cleverer than his unimaginative spouse. Ever since Dorothy had come to woman's estate, and she was now five and twenty, he had been endeavoring to get her off his hands, married to somebody, he

did not care who; he knew exactly by this time what sort of man would marry her, and what sort of man would not. It was quite a waste of time to cultivate eldest sons of good families or rich men of no family, who wished to ally themselves with well-born women, because everybody knew the story of poor Jim's delinquencies;—no, the men he endeavored to bring around his niece were men whose families were insignificant, and whose hearts were inflammable and soft,—men who would be likely to take the beautiful girl for her face, and to shut their eyes to the slur upon her birth. But there again fate was against him, for Dorothy herself was the difficulty. She wanted everything—money, birth, position; and she would be content with nothing less. She set a high value upon her own beauty, and was determined not to sell it for less than it was worth.

For the first few years after she grew up she was absolutely reckless, treating her lovers with a scorn and contumely that turned them into enemies: refusing numberless eligible men, one after the other, only because none of them came quite up to her own standard. But nowadays she had grown more wary, her five-and-twentieth birthday was past, and she was more

inclined to hesitate and to temporize than of old. She kept a dark horse or two, and several cards up her sleeve. The new system was perhaps even more reprehensible and mischievous than the old.

She was as vain and heartless as ever, yet in these latter days she had become less reckless and more calculating than she had been in the first flush of her triumphant girlhood. She admitted to herself that if she could not secure the best, she might have to content herself with the second best. It might be, that if she could not encompass both birth and money together, she would have to choose between them. A title *in esse* versus a millionaire *in posse!* It would be as well to look well before she committed herself to either; that was why Lord Melton, whose title was a fact, but whose patrimony was moderate, was still waiting for his answer. And there was yet another element in Miss Duke's nature, which has to be taken into consideration. In all her life no man, save one, had ever moved her for himself alone, and this one now lay at her feet on the deck of the "Sea Nymph."

Achille de Vernet had awakened in her one of those uncontrollable passions to which ill-

regulated minds are subject. And yet she knew well that he would never marry her, no, not if she were the only woman left upon the earth!

Her only consolation was, that she believed he would never marry anybody else. He had frequently told her that he was too poor to marry at all.

CHAPTER XIII.

FANNED by the light breeze, the "Sea Nymph" pursued a steady course, standing about two miles out to sea from the coast, thus affording to her passengers a charming and ever-shifting panorama of cliff and bay, of frowning headland and shining sands, whilst now and again a group of storm-torn rocks reared their black and jagged sides out of the dimpled waves, which even to-day broke constantly into an angry foam against their base, whilst a cloud of white-winged sea-birds swooped and shrieked incessantly around their summits. The day was warm, and when Miss Duke had finished her strawberries, the little group under the awning became somewhat silent. Lord Melton was in love, and love tied his tongue, although it did not impede the somewhat grotesque ardor of his frequent glances towards the object of his adoration. Dorothy appeared to be unconscious of these glances, for her eyes were closed, and she seemed to be dozing; but, as a matter of fact, her mind was very actively wide awake,

and she knew all about Lord Melton's rapturous gaze, and Achille de Vernet, who was constitutionally indolent, was glad to smoke his cigarette in silence, and was rejoiced to find that for the moment there was no occasion to exert himself to make conversation.

Achille de Vernet was a very striking-looking man. His coloring was somewhat singular, for whilst he had the bronze-brown skin of a southern race, his hair was very fair, his eyes a bright and burning blue, and a blonde moustache, that frayed itself out at the ends, uplifted itself above a well-cut and determined mouth in a curious and thoroughly un-English fashion. His figure was perfect, tall and slight, and exceedingly graceful in movement, and both hands and feet were narrow and remarkably well shaped.

Moreover, there was about him that indescribable air of ease and good breeding which comes by nature to a man who is born to the best society, and has always been thoroughly at home in it; for Achille de Vernet's family was an old one, and he had all an aristocrat's fastidious tastes and pride of birth. He was, as Mrs. Duke had said of him, a younger son, with no expectations outside his somewhat subordi-

nate position as a junior attaché to the French Embassy, a position which family interest had succeeded in obtaining for him a year ago. He had had a very good time of it since he had been in England. All through the London season the London ladies had made a great deal of him, and when they retired to their country houses he had followed them thither, and had paid many delightful visits both in England and Scotland. He had shot, and hunted, and fished with the men, and had flirted with their wives and daughters, without in any way committing himself to any of them in any serious fashion. For, although he had certainly received enough flattery and adulation to have turned his head, had that head been at all a weak one—he had managed, nevertheless, to pass through the ordeal with perfect safety and self-possession. For he was, notwithstanding his poetical and picturesque appearance, an eminently practical young man, and he had come to England fully prepared to resist all female seductions to which he might be subjected. He was going to amuse himself, and that thoroughly, but he had no intention of committing himself. He had heard many things beforehand of the charm and beauty of English ladies; for, all said and done,

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there is no country in Europe whose women are so universally beautiful and attractive, but he had said to himself·

"*Achille, mon garçon*, thou art not going to make a fool of thyself, thou art going to be discreet and careful amongst the married sirens of England, because of thy profession and thy position; and with regard to the unmarried sirens, thou art going to be still more discreet and careful, unless, indeed, thou dost encounter a rich 'Mees' who is madly in love with thee, who yearns to bestow her fortune and her lovely self upon thee, for she must be lovely, and adorable, and well born, as well as rich. As to marriage, under any other circumstances—*Và, pour le mariage!*" and Achille snapped his finger and thumb contemptuously. "I do not intend to sell my liberty on this side of fifty, if I can help it!"

And, acting up to this praiseworthy resolve, Monsieur de Vernet had been hitherto extremely circumspect in his dealings with the members of the fair sex whom he had encountered on this side of the Channel.

He was a perfect and enthusiastic dancer, and was much in request in London ball-rooms, and many was the virgin heart that had flut-

tered beneath the snowy bodice, as its wearer floated round the room to the strains of some dreamy waltz in the arms of the fascinating young attaché. It was said of him that hearts fell like cards before him, and often and often he had caught the shy gleam of love in soft eyes upturned to his own, and had looked discreetly away lest he should be betrayed into too meaning an answering glance; for always his own heart remained calm and self-restrained.

"These English beauties are dangerous," he said to himself, "one cannot be too careful with them. A tender glance, a squeeze of the hand, a murmured *bêtise*, by which nothing is meant, and before one realizes it, one finds oneself confronted with the Monsieur le Papa, or asked one's intentions by Madame la Maman!"

One night at a London ball he met Dorothy Duke. Her beauty attracted him, whilst at the same time he saw through her completely. There was a little contempt in his mind towards her, and yet she interested him, and he classed her differently to all the other English maidens with whom he was accustomed to flirt and waltz. Here was a woman with whom one might be at one's ease; one could say what one liked to her without danger. Miss Duke was clever, she

could take care of herself; no need to be careful here; an open candor would serve him better.

He made some inquiries about her before he went, at her request, to call at her aunt's house in Grosvenor Street. He heard that she was without fortune, and he heard also all about the little history of her birth and parentage. There could therefore be no question of marriage for himself with the beautiful Dorothy, but that was no reason why there should not be a friendship which might be of mutual pleasure and amusement to both.

And in order to place that friendship upon a secure basis, Achille lost no time in making the most frank confidences to his new acquaintance.

"I am not a marrying man," he told her. "Marriage with me is a very remote and distant possibility, for I am poor and have nothing but my profession, and I have my way to make in the world. If ever I marry, I must marry some one who will bring me not only a fortune, but also such connection as will be of use to me in my career. I tell you all this, Miss Duke, because I am convinced that you also have ambition, and intend to marry a rich man, as, indeed, you are very sure to do soon. You and I

have great sympathies in common, and the sympathetic influence of a beautiful and clever woman is of infinite value to a man, and I think you and I might become very good friends, until, *hélas!* that irrevocable doom, *le mari*, takes you away from a desolated world! Till that unhappy day arrives, which will leave so many heartbroken and bereaved—myself amongst the number—will you be a friend to me, Miss Duke?"

Dorothy had laughed with a little embarrassment in reply; it was difficult sometimes to understand whether Achille was in jest or in earnest, for there always seemed to be a little sarcasm underlying his high-flown gallantries: she was half flattered, half piqued, by his request. Yet she consented willingly, and the two dropped at once into an easy and familiar friendship, which whilst it deceived a good many people, never for a moment deceived herself. She knew that what Achille de Vernet had intended her to understand, was that he admired and liked her, but that she was not to expect, under any circumstances, that he would ever ask her to marry him. And although a portionless attaché was by no means the sort of husband she required, this frank avowal of his,

hurt and wounded her so deeply, that she would have given the world to make him fall hopelessly and blindly in love with her; and she longed ardently that some day he might recant all these fine and prudent admissions, and implore her upon his knees to become his wife.

Meanwhile, there was Tom Spinks. And it was about this gentleman that Dorothy was thinking just now, and thinking with much perplexity.

She had not the slightest intention of giving up Tom Spinks. Tom had money—would have a great deal of money, she believed, when his father died. His name was certainly a terrible drawback to him. She did not know how she could ever bring herself to sign that name as her own. "Dorothy Spinks"? how terrible! every time she thought of it she shuddered anew. Still, perhaps, in time she might get accustomed to the sound of it; but as to living in Birmingham, whilst her husband went daily to sit in the office of his father's factory, Dorothy did not think she could ever consent to that. No; if she married him, he must give up Birmingham and live at the Castle, which he had told her he was to inherit from his grandfather. Ah! why was it not Achille instead of

Tom, who was the son of a millionaire and who longed to marry her!—Achille, with his old name and his little aristocratic air, and the queer sleepy eyes that shot currents of fire through her veins every time they looked at her! Alas, how crooked and how topsy-turvy was the world! Here was the one man whom she might have really loved, and he was also the one man whom, by a perversion of fate, she could not marry.

Well, she must not think about that! there was Tom Spinks to be thought about.

And there was this Castle on the Welsh coast! —the Castle which Tom had told her that he would, in all probability, inherit; yet she knew that there are castles and castles!—and Miss Duke had determined to see for herself what this particular Castle was like.

"Then I shall know better what to be at," she said to herself.

CHAPTER XIV.

"I AM sorry to say," said Tom, "that my father will be here the day after to-morrow."

"Sorry! why, you ought to be glad!"

"Of course I ought; good sons should always be glad to see their fathers. You are a walking copybook, Mab, made up of virtuous sentiments! but you see, in my particular case, I can't achieve gladness. 'A burnt child dreads the fire,' and I have found by unhappy experience that whenever my dear governor appears on the scenes, those scenes always become replete with disagreeable situations for my unlucky self. As sure as eggs is eggs!" went on Tom, with the vigorous vernacular of his age and sex, "some abominable row will take place to-morrow!"

"What are you afraid of? Do you think he can have found out——?"

"My engagement to Dorothy? Oh no, it won't be that! Nobody knows of that but just our three selves! It will be about my going into the business at Birmingham, I expect; my father is dead on it, and I expect he has come to speak to grandfather about it. I won't do it,

you know; I won't bind myself down in any way, because of Dorothy."

"Why because of her?" Mab was getting just a little bit tired of the name of Dorothy. The floodgates once opened and the secret let out, Tom could not refrain from mentioning her at every instant. For two whole days he had poured forth his pent-up soul to her. Every time they found themselves alone he descanted upon her beauty and her charm, enlarging also upon her goodness of heart and sweetness of character, in a fashion that set Mab wondering. She was getting hardened to it by now; the rhapsodies, though they wearied her, ceased to pain her so much; the outpouring of love and adoration seemed to fall upon a wound that was seared and callous, yet the constant reiteration of the excellences of another woman began almost to nauseate her. Beautiful Dorothy undoubtedly was, but good! oh, no; Tom must be blind indeed if he could call Dorothy Duke good! Sometimes she longed to contradict him, to cry out that what he said was false, that he deceived himself; but as a matter of fact this inclination never got the better of her, and she listened to it all in a sort of dull trance, with a numb cold pain at her heart, and with even

sometimes a little sense of amusement in her mind. It was so now.

"Why?" he repeated, in answer to her question.

"Dear me, Mab, how dull you are! How could Dorothy possibly live at Birmingham!"

"Why should she not? I suppose a great many ladies do live there."

"But not ladies like Dorothy Duke! Why, she is a queen! it is in London or in Paris that she must shine and reign; it would be an iniquity to bury her in a place like Birmingham—a sin, I tell you. She who might be a princess!" From her heart Mab wished for the Prince who would make her one! Aloud she only said, a little tremulously,

"But if she loves you, Tom——?"

"Of course she loves me. And she is so beautifully unselfish and sweet, she would go there for my sake; she told me she would, God bless her! but she would die, she knows, and I know that it would kill her. She would die in a year!"

Miserable as Mab was, she had a difficulty in refraining from laughing aloud at this, for the idea seemed comic to her. She held her peace, and Tom went on more quietly:

"I will never ask her to live there. I have promised to her that I will somehow get out of it. I can see no other way at present—so long as she will not allow me to tell my father of our engagement—save to temporize, and put it off. I can say I want to see more of the world before I settle down, or I can give my father a conditional promise to think it over for a year; but I will not tie myself down to do a thing which might forfeit my whole position with her."

"Don't you think that if you told uncle Spinks the truth, he might——"

"My dear Mab, have I not told you that I have given her my word not to do so? Dorothy dare not acknowledge her engagement, because her uncle and aunt would forbid it at once. You see, a girl like that is expected by her people to make a brilliant match. I know that I am quite unworthy of her."

Mab turned round and walked suddenly away from him; she could not endure to hear him talk like that. Tom stood looking after her with a little surprise. They were in the terraced garden below the Castle, on the old bowling-green, with its low boundary wall, that looked out towards the sea.

"What a funny tempered girl Mab is!" he thought; "what made her turn off like that, I wonder! Could I have said anything to wound her?"

But the next minute she was running quickly back to him, with wind-ruffled hair and smiling eyes, across the smooth velvet grass, with all the background of shining sea and sky behind her, —a fair sight, in truth, had Tom had the eyes to see it.

"Tom! come and look! there is a big yacht coming into the harbor, a lovely schooner yacht!—come quickly. I wonder where she comes from?"

They went back to the end of the bowling-green and hung over the wall together.

Something very queer rose in Tom's face: wonder, delight, disbelief, and something, too, of apprehension, chased each other rapidly across his features.

They were both watching the schooner intently. She had now lowered her white sails and thrown out her anchor. Her clean spars glittered in the morning sunshine, and one could see a number of people hurrying about her decks.

"There has never been a yacht in Portalloc

Bay since I have been here," remarked Mab. "Grandpapa told me they hardly ever come here, because nothing bigger than a fishing-smack can get in and out unless the weather is perfectly calm, there is such a bar across the entrance. Tom!"—turning suddenly round and looking at him—"what is the matter, you are looking so odd and red; what is it?"

"That yacht is the 'Sea Nymph,'" said Tom below his breath—"her uncle's yacht, and Dorothy Duke must be on board her! She knew I should be here all through June. Oh, Mab! it is for me that she has come here!—for me! Can you doubt now that she loves me?" And there was both triumph and emotion in his voice.

"I never said I doubted it, Tom," answered Mab, gently; and then she turned away from him very sadly. Her heart sank down coldly within her, for she knew now, that to-day would indeed be the very last of good days for her.

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN the "Sea Nymph" cast her anchor in Portalloc Bay, Dorothy Duke came up on deck and looked about her with much interest and some inward satisfaction.

Portalloc Castle presented a very imposing appearance indeed from the sea. For, as I have said, it was the wing of the building which faced the bay which was the inhabited portion of it, and from the spot where the "Sea Nymph" had taken up her moorings, it was impossible to discern the dilapidated condition of the remainder; the front wing completely concealed the ruins, and there was only a glimpse to be seen of ivy-crowned towers and turrets behind it, apparently covering a large space of ground, and suggesting a building that was almost palatial in its dimensions. Behind the Castle the wooded hills rose abruptly till they reached a high range of brown moorland above them, whilst through a deep wooded gully to the left the river rushed tumultuously down into the

bay, between fern-clad banks and over great boulders, through which it tumbled from pool to pool in a succession of miniature waterfalls. At the head of the bay the hills fell away into a wide green valley of cultivated meadow lands with the cottages of the little fishing village clustering between them and the beach.

"Upon my word, a very sweet spot indeed!" said Captain Duke, who was standing beside his niece. "What a magnificent old Castle! it was quite worth coming out of our way to discover such a romantic place; it is entirely your doing, Dorothy, my dear, though I can't remember now what put it into your head to wish to come here. Who was it told you of it?"

The whole party were now assembled together on deck admiring the view, and Dorothy proceeded to answer her uncle's question, with a comprehensive glance which took in every one.

"Well, long ago, I was told about Portalloc by an old schoolfellow of mine at the Ladies' College at Townchester. You must remember Mabel Eardley, Aunt Jane? she used to come out and spend her half holidays with us at Townchester—a dear girl."

"I remember her, but I think she came only once," replied her more veracious aunt, slowly;

"but as far as I can recollect, she was much younger than you, and you did not care about her, Dorothy."

"Oh, yes, I was very fond of her; we were great friends."

"And was this her home?" inquired Lord Melton.

"Well, she herself had never seen it, but her father was born here, and she often talked of it to me; her mother had been there in her youth, and she had seen pictures of it, and used to give me long and glowing descriptions of what she had gathered about it, which impressed me immensely. So, when uncle was arranging our cruise this year, I remembered it, and I begged him to put in here, so that we might inspect this enchanted Castle for ourselves."

"And does your friend live here now?"

"I am not at all sure. You see, her old grandfather, Mr. Eardley, who owns it, quarreled with her mother, it seems, and had never invited them to stay with him. Mabel did not even know her grandfather, but she was always longing to see the place; however, we are going to see it! for it would be perfectly absurd to go away without thoroughly exploring it, wouldn't it?"

"I don't see how we can very well do that, Dorothy," demurred her uncle; "we have no sort of introduction to this Mr. Eardley, and no gentleman likes his house to be invaded by a parcel of strangers he knows nothing about. A school acquaintance with a young lady whom he does not know or acknowledge, even though she happens to be his granddaughter, does not constitute a sufficient excuse for asking a favor of that kind."

"Oh, but I am not go ng to ask a favor of him; I am going to write a note to Mabel herself."

"But is she here? I thought you said she had never been to her grandfather's house?"

Dorothy declared she had no definite knowledge on the subject, only an instinct. Mrs. Eardley and her daughter having left Townchester, what more natural than that they should have gone to Portalloc? It was worth the chance, any way, and she would be so glad to see dear Mabel again,—such a sweet girl, not in the least pretty—rather plain, in fact, but so nice and simple. "I always loved her!" added Dorothy, rapturously; "it will be too delightful if I can meet her again! and we shall see the Castle at the same time."

"To my certain knowledge," whispered Mrs. Duke to her daughter Florence, "Dorothy hardly knew the girl, either when they were at the Ladies' College together or afterwards when she grew up. She must be at least five or six years younger than Dorothy, and she could have seen very little of her at school. What is the meaning of this sudden freak?"

"She wants something, I suppose," replied the unlovely Florence, who was no fool, in the same lowered tone. "I don't suppose Mabel Eardley is anything but an excuse."

The upshot of it was, that after some further discussion, a willing messenger volunteered to carry the letter, and the yacht's gig shortly set forth across the bay, in the direction of Portalloc Castle, with Monsieur Achille de Vernet seated in the stern.

Although Portalloc stood upon a sheer precipice, which fell away from the base of its massive walls straight into the sea, yet it was not without means of access to the bay. A footpath sloped away from the corner of the terraced gardens down a steep incline through the thick woods. If you followed this path to the end, you found yourself by the edge of a tiny creek, which ran in for a few hundred yards

between the wooded cliffs, and was dignified by the name of the harbor. Here, there were also the fisherman's hut and its tiny garden, a little sloping shingle beach, and a small stone pier wall, which, jutting out into the water, formed a landing-stage for boats. In the creek lay a couple of boats, which had been originally built especially for Mab's father, but were now very seldom used, except, indeed, during Tom's annual visit, when he was accustomed to go out in them for sea fishing, in the company of the same venerable fisherman who had lived at the cottage in the creek ever since poor Herbert Eardley's days, and was himself nearly as old as his master. It would be impossible to imagine a quieter spot than this little creek wherein the old man spent his tranquil days. The little basin was so completely sheltered from the waters of the bay, that at no time did the angry waves outside invade its placid repose. A dancing ripple in stormy weather; miniature waves that murmured upon the shingle: this was the utmost that ever ruffled the peaceful surface of the narrow inlet. In summer weather the basin was as clear and still as glass, and the wooded cliffs that overhung it mirrored themselves back, line for line, in its silent depths.

Only the tide touched it, leaving in receding wide yellow margins of seaweed along the bases of the black rocks, and gurgling back softly and noiselessly at the ebb, till the long fringes were once more submerged beneath the lapping water.

Here old Williams spent the calm evening of his life. He had no duties save to keep the boats in order, to mend the seldom-used nets, and when "Master Tom" was at the Castle, to go out with him by night or by day as it suited him. He lived alone with a crippled daughter, his only child, who was nevertheless the joy and delight of his heart.

Very soon Mab, who was quick at finding out the sick and the sorrowful, struck up a friendship with poor Sheena Williams. The bright face and happy smile of the poor girl who could not walk, who would never walk again, won Mab's admiration. Sheena lay on her couch in the cottage window, where she could see the creek and the boats, and a glimpse of the bay beyond. She did all sorts of needle-work with her busy fingers, fine embroidery and pillow lace, and elaborate woolwork, which was sold for her at the nearest market town, the proceeds of which helped to keep the little

cottage comfortable and even luxurious; and an old woman, a cousin of her father's, came in and "did" for them daily, cooking, and tidying, and cleaning the cottage. Mab had made friends with Sheena very soon after her arrival at Portalloc. The girl was intelligent, and better educated than might be supposed from her position and surroundings, and Mab liked to talk to her, or at other times she read aloud to her, whilst the crippled girl worked industriously at her needle.

It was not quite without ulterior motives that Mab found herself sitting by Sheena Williams' sofa to-day, for Tom had unaccountably disappeared immediately after the discovery he had made about the arrival of Captain Duke's yacht, and Mab wondered much what had become of him. She supposed he would go out to the 'Sea Nymph," and if he did so he must row himself, or get Williams to row him out to her; but when she reached the little harbor, the two boats lay still at their moorings, and there was no sign of Tom at all.

Mab sat down by Sheena and began to read, but her thoughts wandered, and her reading became monotonous and mechanical.

The arrival of this yacht upset her. If, as

Tom said, Dorothy Duke was on board her, then she must have come here on purpose, for she knew that Tom was here. What had she come to do? Was it only longing to see her lover that had prompted her to so imprudent a step?

Mab could not believe it; she felt convinced, however, that this unforeseen visit would bring trouble,—trouble to Tom, certainly, and possibly a good deal of pain to herself.

CHAPTER XVI.

FROM the open door of the fisherman's cottage there was no glimpse to be caught of the newly-arrived schooner yacht, for the wooded cliffs almost overlapped each other at the narrow entrance to the creek, so that only a silver streak of the wider expanse of water beyond was visible. Old Williams sat close outside the open door in the sun, mending a great brown net, which lay across his knees, and fell down on either side of him into two rough heaps of cordage. He liked to listen to Mab's reading, and although the sense of the poetry was a good deal above his comprehension, the swinging rhythm of the lines seemed to soothe and gratify his ear. It was like music to the old fellow. The bees hummed amongst the scented lavender and mignonette in the little cottage garden, and a couple of yellow butterflies chased each other backwards and forwards across the deep pool. It was high water, and even the hand of the restless tide seemed for the moment to be stayed.

It was all so peaceful and still, that when Sheena uttered a sharp exclamation of astonishment, Mab looked up with a start, and the book slipped out her hands on the ground.

Like a sudden vision from another world, the peaceful scene without, had become in a moment transfigured into life and noise and movement.

A large, well-appointed boat had shot through the narrow entrance into the center of the quiet creek. She was as spic and span as varnish and new paint could make her, and she was manned by four extremely smart sailors, all in straw hats, and white duck trousers, and scarlet jerseys, with the name "Sea Nymph" written across their chests in white letters.

In the stern of the boat, with the tiller ropes in his hands, sat a young man in a very blue serge suit, with a gray felt hat on his fair head, whose ringing voice in the shouted orders to "ease," to "back water," to "ship," were given in a smart and ready fashion, which showed him to be no tyro in the position of "Cox," which he temporarily filled.

The boat drew up at the landing-stage as neatly as a carriage to a front door. And the young man in the blue suit stepped out on to the low stone wall and looked about him.

Old Williams, recovering his amazement with an effort, now awoke to a sense of duty. Throwing down his net on to the garden walk, he hobbled quickly down, cap in hand, to receive the invaders.

"My good man," said the young man to him as he approached, "this is, I believe, the private landing-place of Portalloc Castle?"

He spoke with a little foreign accent, but in perfect English. Mab could hear every word he said distinctly from where she sat unseen within the cottage.

"Yes, sir, although it's a wonder to me how you found it, being strangers to these parts, as I perceive."

"Ah, we are not all quite strangers here," replied Monsieur de Vernet, with a careless laugh; "we have our pilot, you see; and looking towards the crew Williams became aware of the grinning face of a young fellow in the bows, who was a Portalloc man born and bred, and who had gone away from his native village to seek his fortune some two years ago. This explained the ease with which the gig had made the somewhat difficult and almost unfindable entrance to the creek.

"How are ye, Bill Jones," said the old man,

gruffly; and Bill Jones displayed a set of very white teeth in answer.

But old Williams considered that Bill Jones had taken a liberty in bringing a yacht's boat uninvited into Mr. Eardley's harbor, and would not further unbend to him. He turned his back upon him, and addressed himself to the gentleman again:

"And what might you please to want, sir, at Portalloc?" he inquired, with frigid and a somewhat suspicious politeness, for he considered himself, from the sea approach, to be the guardian of his master's property, and a "furriner" did not commend himself to him even if he were found in the gig of an English yacht.

Achille de Vernet, who was quite alive to the misgivings in the old man's mind, which it amused him extremely to perceive, replied, gaily: "Oh, we have not come to do any mischief to your master's property; you need be under no apprehension, old man; just run up to the house as fast as your legs can carry you with this letter to the young lady who is staying there, and bring me back an answer if you can. I promise you I will wait here on these stones, where I stand now, and not one of the men shall set foot upon the land until you return."

Williams took the letter from the speaker's hand, and turned it slowly over.

"No occasion to 'run,' sir; Miss Eardley be here herself now."

"Here! Where?" He lifted his head sharply and looked about him, and then he caught sight of Mab in her pink cotton dress, standing in the shadow of the open doorway of the thatched cottage. "Ah, is that Miss Eardley? then I will deliver my message myself;" and taking back the letter, Achille strode quickly across the intervening space.

Mab gathered that she was wanted, and came forward a little shyly down the garden path to meet him.

There was an archway of honeysuckle over the wooden gate beneath which she paused, and with a little nervous movement she broke a spray of the flower and twisted it about in her fingers. There was a little shy embarrassment in her eyes, a little gleam of amusement too, for the situation struck her as funny. What would Tom say if he came down the steep path just now and found her in conversation with an unknown foreign gentleman? And then she was very much surprised, too, for she could not imagine what this letter could be, nor who could

be writing to her. All this brought a curious expectancy into her eyes, and heightened the charm of a face that was interesting rather than beautiful.

Achille de Vernet often thought afterwards of Mab, as he saw her now for the first time, with the arching flowers above her head, and the half timid, half fearless questioning glance fixed upon himself.

"Mademoiselle," he said, bowing low, with his hand upon his heart; and somehow, when Monsieur de Vernet bowed like that to a woman, it never seemed to be a ridiculous or an exaggerated action—"Mademoiselle, I am charged with a letter for you from your friend, Miss Duke."

"For me? Miss Duke has written to *me?*" she cried in astonishment. She broke the envelope with hurried fingers, having first glanced at the address, to make sure that it was not intended for Tom.

"There will be an enclosure for Tom," she thought. But no, there was only a note for herself.

"My dear Mabel,—I used to call you by your Christian name once,"—Mab was very sure she

never had,—"I can't help thinking that you must be staying with your grandfather at Portalloc Castle, and if so, will you be so sweet and kind as to ask him to give us leave to come and see it? It looks so beautiful and interesting from a distance, that we long to get permission to inspect it nearer. By 'we' I mean my uncle and aunt and their friends on the 'Sea Nymph,' one of whom, Monsieur de Vernet, has kindly volunteered to carry this note to you. Please send back word by him if we may land and walk round the gardens. My uncle would be sorry to annoy your grandfather in any way, so we will not ask to go *inside* the house, which might perhaps disturb him. So nice if I can see you again for a minute, dear!—Your affectionate friend, DOROTHY DUKE."

Not a word of Tom from beginning to end.

All the time she was reading the letter, Achille de Vernet was watching her face. Across it, changing thoughts chased each other swiftly—surprise, bewilderment, even he fancied a little annoyance; he could not read the meanings of them all, only the changes, that passed like shadow and sun-gleams across a landscape, interested and charmed him.

"And the fair Dorothy; who told us this girl was not pretty!" he thought, as he watched her.

Then she lowered the letter and looked at him, with a little cold formality, which he liked, because, perhaps, it was what he was unaccustomed to see in women's eyes.

"If you will kindly wait, I will go and ask my grandfather," she said, simply.

CHAPTER XVII.

THERE is a familiar paradox which tells us that there is nothing so probable as the unexpected; to which another might very justly be added, to the effect that there are no circumstances to which we adapt ourselves more quickly than to those that are unforeseen.

If Mab Eardley had been told yesterday that she would find herself seated to-day at an enlarged luncheon table, in the dining-room of Portalloc Castle, in company with Captain and Mrs. Duke, Dorothy Duke, and the two gentlemen who were guests on board the "Sea Nymph," she would certainly have said that such a thing was altogether out of the range of human probability.

Yet this was the very thing that had come to pass. Here they were, five of them, laughing and talking, and eating chicken mayonnaise round the table. Their party would have been six—for Mr. Eardley's hospitality desired to include every one—but the unlucky Florence, hav-

ing caught a violent cold in her chest, was condemned to be left behind, and consigned to her cabin and to mustard poultices and gruel by her careful mother.

And, oddly enough, it was Mab who was credited with the whole situation. She had duly taken Miss Duke's letter to her grandfather, who had read it through with much interest, Tom standing by the while, on thorns of apprehension and anxiety; and Mr. Eardley had at once jumped to the conclusion that the whole party were friends of Mab's.

"Friends of yours, Mab? why, of course they can come!—delighted, my dear child, to see any of your friends here."

Mab's lips parted; she was on the point of disclaiming any friendship at all with any of these people, for the only one of them she knew was scarcely to be called a friend; but before she had uttered a word, she caught Tom's eyes fixed upon her in an agony of entreaty, and she understood that he wished her to let the fiction stand; so she closed her lips and held her tongue, though with rather a red face.

Mr. Eardley's eyes were still upon Miss Duke's letter.

"'Walk round the gardens,'" he read out

from it with a frown; "'will not ask to go inside the house.' Stuff and nonsense! if people want to see Portalloc they had better see it properly. Tell your friend to bring the whole party, uncle and aunt and friends, over to lunch to-morrow. They can stop as long as they like, and explore the old place to their heart's content."

"Oh, grandpapa!" cried Mab, with a little gasp of dismay.

"Well, why not? Do you suppose I am ashamed of Portalloc, Miss Mab?"

And then there was Tom, standing behind his grandfather, with his face wreathed in smiles, nodding his head violently at her.

"Stay, I will write myself," said Mr. Eardley. He sat down at his writing-table, and dashed off a charming and comprehensive invitation to Captain Duke and his whole party. Nothing, he said, would please him better than that they should all honor him with their company to lunch.

A servant was sent down to the creek to give the answer to Dorothy's note to the gentleman who had brought it; and so Mab was not required to encounter him again.

And here they all were to-day, seated round the luncheon table.

As fate would have it, Mr. Eardley, who seldom saw and cared little for strangers, took a great liking to the bluff old sea-captain. Captain Duke had seen some active service, together with a good deal of the world, in his younger days, and, moreover, he was a man of intelligent and educated tastes. Very soon, the two discovered a hobby in common; they both collected coins. To the uninitiated, the accumulation of coins might appear to be an unfathomable pit of dulness; but to those "in the know," the subject is replete with acute and vivid interest. The moment that lunch was over, Mr. Eardley hurried his guest away to inspect his treasures, many of which—Roman, and Saxon, and early Welsh—had been discovered amongst the ruins of Portalloc itself—being thus invested with a double value in his eyes. Meanwhile, Mrs. Duke had, for her part, been strongly attracted by the widowed Mrs. Herbert Eardley. Although they had both lived for many years, the one in Townchester and the other a few miles out of it, they had never met before, though they had known each other perfectly by sight. They now found many subjects in common, and a little harmless gossip concerning mutual friends, soon

ripened into a very friendly and intimate intercourse.

"Go and show your friends over the house and gardens, Mab!" had said Mr. Eardley to Mab, as he left the younger people together; and Mab had arisen obediently to perform the office of cicerone which was thrust upon her.

Very soon, as was perfectly right and natural, Tom and Miss Duke drew away from the others; she saw them pass under the old gateway, and wander away along one of the many deeply-shaded paths which led upwards through the woods. It was inevitable, of course; and what else could she possibly have expected? Yet somehow the pain of it came home to her acutely. She had, perhaps, never wholly realised before what Tom's engagement meant to herself. As long as she had had him to herself, as long as he only talked about Dorothy, Mab had seemed able to bear it; but what goes on under one's very eyes is infinitely more real to us than that which exists only somewhere out of our sight. To see Tom walking close to Miss Duke, looking into her face, bending his head to catch her lightest word, putting out his hand towards her arm with a protective gesture, lest her foot should stumble upon the loose stones of

the road caused Mab a stab of jealousy that was almost physical. She knew now for the for the first time how less than nothing she was to this man, and how dearly she might have loved him! Her heart was brimful of pain.

What were they saying to each other those two, as they walked slowly side by side under the drooping branches of the beeches and oaks? If she had overheard the conversation, Mab might perhaps have been consoled!

"I never was so disappointed in my life," Miss Duke was saying, crossly, "and it looked so imposing from the sea! You never gave me to understand that it was such a tumble-down place as this, Tom!"

"My darling, I always told you it was very old."

"Old! yes; so are the Tower of London and Windsor Castle old! but they are not heaps of rubble! Why, even the small part you live in, isn't fit to hold a decent establishment!—such pokey little rooms, and low passages, and wretched winding staircases! there isn't a good-sized room in the whole house, where one could give any sort of entertainment to one's friends! The only thing to do with such a ramshackle

old place, is to pull it all down and build a modern house on the site of it."

"I could not pull down Portalloc, Dorothy," said Tom, in rather a constrained voice, "nor would I, if I could, build a new house here."

"Why not? you will have lots of money some day, you say; if the place is to be yours, you may as well make it habitable, which it certainly is not now."

"You don't understand, dearest. My grandfather would never leave it me under such conditions; it would be sacrilege in his eyes. You see Portalloc is—well—is Portalloc! it may be tumble-down, but it is unique of its kind; the old man's only desire is that it shall be preserved as it is, for centuries."

"And how is he to know, pray, when he is under ground?" replied Miss Duke, with a careless shrug of her shoulders; and as Tom made no answer, she continued with a laugh: "Well, of course, it's your business, not mine; all I can say is, don't expect *me* ever to live in your old ruins!—nothing on earth would induce me to make it my home"

It was certainly not a very lover-like conversation, was it? But then poor Mab did not know that.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MEANWHILE Mab was going conscientiously and laboriously through her duties as show-woman, to the two young men who had been left on her hands. They did not interest her in the very least, either of them ; her friend of yesterday, with his pretty manner and attractive personality, made no more impression upon her than did the red-haired ugly little lord on the other side of her. She scarcely knew one from the other: she was coldly, icily polite to both. She took them round the walls and up to the keep, and down into the dungeons, and from thence on to the terraced gardens and the bowling-green, all with the same weary and listless inattention in her voice and eyes. For her heart was sick within her, and the pain she was suffering seemed to absorb all lesser sensations.

There came a moment, however, when Lord Melton, who was profoundly indifferent to Portalloc, and who was not only bored, but jealous and out of temper as well, could stand the situation no longer.

"Would you like to see the old guard-room?" Mab had just inquired politely of her two companions; "it is the only room with a roof on it left upon the north side; there are also some very curious cellars under the house which might interest you; they are vaulted, and grandpapa considers them to be the oldest portion of the Castle."

"Ah—thanks," drawled Lord Melton without so much as turning his eyes upon her as he spoke, for this quiet-faced girl did not excite the faintest interest in his mind. "I think, if you won't mind, Miss Eardley, I'll sit down in this shady corner and smoke a cigar; I've had about enough of scrambling about your old stones; one hits one's shins and makes oneself hot and dusty. And there isn't much to see, you know! I don't consider it good enough to risk my neck clambering up and down into crypts and cellars. I think I'll just sit down here and smoke for a bit, if you will excuse me."

"But I should like to see the guard-room immensely!" cried Achille de Vernet, with sudden alacrity; "don't mind that stupid fellow, Miss Eardley: he is blasé, nothing amuses him, he is hopeless! As for me, I find your Portal-

loc charming, so picturesque and poetical in its ruin! Besides,"—he lowered his voice sentimentally, and looked at her with his head on one side,—"a man does not often get such a blessed chance as this! to wander with so fair a guide through these romantic scenes—alone! If you knew how much I have longed for this moment—to be rid of that stupid youth. Show me everything, Miss Eardley, and your beauty shall be my beacon light."

"This key is horribly stiff, I can't turn it," said Mab, in the most matter-of-fact tone of voice, as though she had not heard a single word that he said. She was fitting a key into the door from a bunch in her hand—for the guard-room was kept locked—but it was clumsy and rusty, and she could not move it.

The young Frenchman turned crimson; for the first time in his life Monsieur de Vernet said to himself that he was a conceited coxcomb. A sense of humiliating mortification kept him as silent now, as he had been talkative a moment ago. "She is not that sort of girl," he said to himself, "to be flattered by the crude and meaningless compliments that please most young ladies. I ought to have known better!"

His next venture was a happier one.

Mab was still struggling with the key; if she had heard his words she evidently disdained to answer them.

"Won't you allow me to help you?" he said, quite humbly. She drew back, and he quickly forced the key round and opened the door; then, as he stood back to let her pass in, he murmured penitently, "Will you forgive me, Miss Eardley?"

She looked up and met his eyes with a little smile. She did not pretend to ignore his meaning.

"Because you talked foolish nonsense, Monsieur de Vernet? I believe all men do—don't they?—to girls."

"Not to girls like you, Miss Eardley; I should have had more intelligence than to make silly speeches to you."

She liked him better after that, as was natural, and exerted herself to do the honors of the guard-room efficiently. There was an old carved fire-place in the room, some heavy stone benches round the walls, and all the old arquebusses, and bows, and sabers that had been found in and around the Castle; relics of many a bloody fight had been gathered together and hung up here. A steel helmet and cuirass hung in one

corner with a ragged coat of mail beneath it; iron gauntlets lay heaped upon one window-shelf, rusty breast-plates and battle-axes upon another; the whole room, in fact, was filled of the trophies of battle.

Achille, who was rather a connoisseur in old armor, became really interested in these relics, and examined them attentively. Mab knew the histories of many of the fragments from her grandfather's book, as well as from himself, and was able to give him some details, about them. In a few minutes she became her bright sweet self again, and forgot her heartache for the time, whilst Achille de Vernet, resuming his natural manner, became infinitely more pleasing to her in consequence. They began to get on—to be friends.

"Look at this sword, Monsieur de Vernet," she was saying to him. "You see how beautifully the handle must have been chased, although now it is nearly effaced; what an elaborate pattern runs round it; and here is a figure: my grandfather thinks it is meant for St. George, though the dragon has disappeared in this dent."

Achille stooped over the sword to examine it more closely. His fair head was quite close to

Mab's dark one, as she too bent over the battered weapon, whilst she pointed out the details of the design to him. A shaft of sunshine that shot through the dusty diamond-paned window, took in both heads in its warm and golden glow.

"Quite a pretty picture!" cried a voice in the doorway. "Really, we feel quite sorry to disturb you; don't we, Mr. Spinks? Oh, don't mind us, we are going, of course! We wouldn't think of spoiling sport for the world!"

And Miss Duke's eyes flashed angrily from one to the other, whilst instinctively the couple in the guard-room drew apart from each other, Achille rather red and confused, Mab pale and a little bewildered.

She had recognized the ring of a bitter jealousy in Dorothy Duke's words, perhaps because she knew herself now what jealousy meant. But what was there to make Miss Duke jealous? Was not Tom with her—Tom, who was her own?

Mab felt bewildered. She saw that Tom looked uneasy—unhappy almost. When Mab looked at him, he could not meet her eyes, but turned away. And then Dorothy laughed a little hard mocking laugh; a prelude to the disagreeable words that followed.

"Don't put any faith in that man, Mab! He talks nonsense to every girl he meets, and makes love to everything in petticoats! Monsieur de Vernet has a reputation for breaking hearts—it is his amusement—it is a dangerous game to flirt with him!"

"Is it?" said Mab, quietly; "but that is not my affair—for I do not flirt with anybody. Tom, have you taken Miss Duke into the Chapel?" And no one would have guessed from the calm voice and steady eyes, with what wild indignation poor Mab's heart was beating.

"Oh, I've had enough of ruins!" cried Miss Duke, almost rudely; "don't, for goodness' sake, show me anything else in that line!"

"Then shall we go in? I think tea must be ready now;" and Mab led the way across the green towards the door of the house.

Miss Duke felt snubbed, and raged inwardly, Tom was secretly ashamed of her, somehow; his Dorothy was not quite so perfect in his eyes as usual to-day. Nevertheless, he was loyal to her, and tried to make excuses for her: she was in a false position; she was disappointed too with the place; perhaps she was tired, or had a headache—he could not quite tell—but something was amiss with her certainly.

As to Monsieur Achille de Vernet, he said to himself with some amusement, as he followed the others, "Dorothy Duke is very common and vulgar! Her temper and insolence are insufferable! The mother, as I have heard, was of low class. Bad blood always comes out. But as for Miss Eardley, she is a true little lady—*pure sang jusqu'au bout des ongles!* how beautifully she said that! What a proud purity there was in her quiet cold voice—in her flashing eyes! What a true woman she is too! Ah, it seems to me that I have never met a true woman before! It is a revelation to me!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"It is only for one day, and they will be gone to-morrow!"

Oddly enough, this had been the thought, not only in Mab's mind concerning the visitors from the "Sea Nymph," but also in Tom's as well!

Delighted as Tom had been at the appearance of the yacht in the bay, deeply in love as he undoubtedly was with the fair niece of her owner, he was forced to acknowledge to himself that he would rather she had come to Portalloc at any other time than the present.

Tom could not forget that his father was due to arrive at the Castle to-morrow, and that his father should meet Dorothy was the last wish of his heart. If the secret was to be kept, it was as well, he knew, that his father should not be brought into close contact with its existence. Spinks *père* had the eyes of a ferret, and the nose of a spaniel for all things that no one else perceived or scented. Tom knew very well

that however Dorothy flouted or ignored him, his father would not be taken in by it, and he himself was not an adept at dissimulation. If Mr. Spinks chose to take the trouble, he could find him out directly. And, indeed, poor Tom knew that he could not control his eyes, and they were brimful of love whenever he looked at his beloved. He could not help looking at her constantly; she was the magnet to which he turned involuntarily, her beauty drew him irresistibly—it was quite impossible to him to pretend indifference when she was in the room!

"Old Spinks," as he was commonly called in Birmingham, although he was by no means old, being only fifty years of age, and well preserved at that, was clever and as "cute" as a lifetime of exceedingly "smart" business dealings with his fellow-creatures could make him. He always took it for granted that everybody wanted to "best" him, and it was the effort of his existence to turn the tables upon the residue of mankind, and to "best" them. The time had perhaps come now, when he was to be "bested" himself in earnest! Tom dreaded his father's visit to Portalloc. As he had told Mab, whenever his father appeared on the scene, something disagreeable was sure to happen; what that

"something" would be on the present occasion he could not divine, but he was quite sure that it would not be less disagreeable than usual, if his father were to detect his attachment to Captain Duke's beautiful but nameless niece.

The moon shone full and clear to-night over the sea; dinner was over, and Tom had wandered out alone to smoke his evening pipe. He leant over the low wall at the end of the bowling-green, and looked out over the bay. The "Sea Nymph" lay dark in the silvery track of the moonlight, and Tom sighed when he thought that to-morrow, in all human probability, she and all on board her would be far away out at sea, and that it might be weeks, nay, months, ere he saw his Dorothy again! Nevertheless, in spite of this poignant regret, he still said to himself emphatically:

"It is best that she should go to-morrow. I hope that nothing will stop her."

There seemed almost a sort of prevision in his mind about it; it was as though he knew that if Dorothy did not go, evil would come of it.

Almost at the self-same moment, Mab, leaning out of her bedroom window, looked out also across the moonlit waters towards the yacht, and said to herself, from widely different motives:

"Pray God the weather holds up, and that she goes by daybreak!"

For poor Mab had had a terrible day of it, for to get the better of a disastrous love one is bound to suffer, and she had been very thankful when, shortly after tea was over, the whole party had wished farewell to their entertainers, and had betaken themselves to the yacht's gig, which awaited them down in the creek.

"We are off by daybreak!" cried Captain Duke, as he wished his host farewell, "but we shall never forget your hospitable welcome to Portalloc, Mr. Eardley, nor all your kindness to us. Our visit to you, sir, has been a most agreeable incident in our cruise. Good-by,—good-by!"

Mr. Eardley stood upon the doorstep and sniffed the air north and south with a doubtful look.

"Well! I am not quite so sure, Captain, that it is to be good-by. I am rather a weather prophet, and, do you know, I can't help thinking there is a change coming, a falling glass, Captain Duke, and a westerly wind, and that bank of cloud out there, humph! I wouldn't swear but that you'll find yourself weatherbound, by the morning, and you can't get out of Por-

talloc Bay, tide or no tide, in rough weather, remember!"

"Well, then, we shall all turn up again, sir, like bad pennies!" laughed the Captain.

"I hold you to that promise, Captain Duke; we've not had it out about that gold Diocletian, remember!"

"Caractacus, my dear Mr. Eardley, you mean!" corrected his opponent in coins, warmly.

"I don't give in to you as to that, remember!"

"Well, I expect we shall be able to discuss it again to-morrow! so come and eat some dinner with us, all of you, if you are kept here," cried the hospitable host, waving his hand to them as they trooped away down the steep path towards the creek.

Dinner that evening had been a trying ordeal for both Tom and Mab. Mr. Eardley, who led a very solitary life in his old ruined Castle, had been highly delighted at the welcome change in his monotonous existence made by the unexpected arrival of visitors. He was in good spirits, and talked about them incessantly. Captain Duke was a sensible fellow, he said; he had found him clever and highly educated, and he was interested in Portalloc, too, and had expressed a very intelligent desire to read the "History."

"I am going to send him a copy of my book," said the old man with a little importance. "Mrs. Duke, who seems an agreeable and ladylike person, is anxious to read it also; they will find in it every information they desire about the place, I told them. As to those young fellows, I don't know how you got on with them, Mab. The Frenchman appeared to be an agreeable and a well-mannered young man; but that young Lord Something struck me as rather a cub; however, I dare say there is no harm in him. To which of the two is Miss Duke engaged?" he added, looking up at his granddaughter over the top of his spectacles.

"Miss Duke?" faltered Mab, rather taken aback at this question. "Oh, I don't think to either, grandpapa!" She looked helplessly across the table at Tom, who was gulping down a glass of sherry with rather a red face.

"Don't you think so, Mab? Well, I fancy there's something on with both of them. I am pretty quick at seeing things, you know. It's my idea that they are both after her, but it's the Frenchman she fancies!"

A dead silence.

"Poor fellow!" continued Mr. Eardley presently, as he helped himself to a cutlet. "If it

is his fate to marry her, I am sorry for him! I should pity any man who is to be the husband of that young lady!"

"*Grandpapa!*" cried Mab.

Tom dropped a fork with a clatter off the table, and had to stoop down to pick it up.

"Oh, you needn't call out, Miss Mab!" said Mr. Eardley, smiling at her. "I am not going to pretend to like her, to please you. Miss Dorothy, for all her good looks, is the only one of the party I don't like at all. I wouldn't trust that young woman further than I can see her!"

Nobody answered him. Tom was afraid to speak lest his indignation should blaze forth too hotly, and betray him, and Mab was lost in admiration of the keenness of her grandfather's perceptions, which had led him to form so true an opinion of Miss Duke's character. She agreed with him too entirely to contradict him, which did not make her any the less sorry for Tom, and she earnestly hoped, for his sake, that Dorothy was not playing a double game with him.

"Of course," she said to herself, "she is an arrant flirt, and I suppose she always will be, but I can't believe that she would behave so badly as to throw Tom over for either of those

men who were here to-day." Yet there were sundry things about Miss Duke's conduct which Mab could neither explain nor understand. "However, she goes away to-morrow," she thought with satisfaction. "That is the only comfort, for it will be better for us all when she is gone!"

But in the middle of the night the winds and the waves arose, as Mr. Eardley had foreseen that they would. And the tempest howled and roared about the old Castle walls, and the angry breakers dashed against the cliffs below, and the rain descended in sheets and in torrents, and there was evidently no chance whatever that the "Sea Nymph" would be able to leave her moorings.

CHAPTER XX.

TOM's father arrived in time for lunch.

Mr. Spinks resembled Tom to an extent which made Mab wince when she looked at him for the first time. Like Tom he was short and broad-shouldered, with a stumpy nose and a wide mouth below it—no one could have mistaken them for anything but father and son; and yet there was all the difference in the world between them, for Tom, partly owing to nature, through the medium of his mother, and partly owing to his Eton and Oxford education, looked, and was, a gentleman, whilst it would have been quite impossible to describe Spinks the father as bearing the remotest resemblance to one.

There were little details of his appearance which militated sadly against him: the bristling gray hair, which stood out like a scrubbing-brush all round his broad and prominent forehead, the little close-trimmed mutton-chop whiskers, something repulsive in the thick lines

of his chin and throat, and exceedingly large and common-looking hands and feet, which Tom had providentially not inherited. But worse than all these blemishes were the faults of his manner and the showiness of his attire; for the self-assertion, the swagger of the man who values his own wealth were self-evident in him, no less than the tie which was many shades too brilliant, and the large scarf-pin of rubies that fastened it, to say nothing of the enormous diamond which glittered on his clumsy middle finger.

Yet in some ways, for all his vulgarity, Mr. Spinks was an estimable man. He was charitable and even generous to the poor, and never turned his back nor shut his purse-strings upon any case of real destitution; and he was also a man of his word: when he gave a promise he could be trusted to keep it—a feature which was not inconsistent with a dogged obstinacy and an unswerving determination.

He was extremely polite to Mab and her mother, shook hands warmly with them both, and complimented Mrs. Eardley, with doubtful taste and a patronizing manner, upon her daughter's appearance.

"A very fine girl she has grown into," he

declares audibly, staring hard at Mab as he spoke. "A very fine girl, indeed! I am a very good judge of beauty, Marion, and I am sure you must be proud of your daughter's looks."

Mab laughed as she caught her grandfather's eye.

"I am glad you admire me, Uncle Spinks!" she said, merrily. She sat opposite to him at luncheon, and she could not help fancying that he observed her with very marked attention during the whole meal—with more attention, indeed, than the occasion seemed to require. On the other hand, he took very little notice of Tom, who was silent and out of spirits, and whose eyes strayed constantly out of the window across the Bay, where the "Sea Nymph" was dipping and rolling amongst the rough gray waters.

"I have a little business to transact with you, Mr. Eardley," remarked Mr. Spinks when the meal was drawing to a conclusion; "and as business comes before pleasure with me, sir, I should like to attend to it as early as possible."

"After lunch, Spinks, after lunch. Let's get business over by all means, but I must finish my lunch in peace first. As soon as I have had

my coffee I shall be at your orders. We shall want you too, I expect, Tom."

"Me!" Tom looked up, startled. "I intended to row out to the 'Sea Nymph' after lunch, to make sure about their coming to-night."

"Not the slightest occasion in the world for that!" replied his grandfather. "It was an understood thing between Captain Duke and myself that they should all come over to dinner if they were still here. I am expecting a party of friends who are on board that yacht," he said, turning to his son-in-law. "They will dine with us to-night."

"Then there's certainly no object in your going to see them in the afternoon, Tom," agreed Mr. Spinks. "Your grandfather is right; the business concerns you, and you must stop where you are, to hear it."

Tom looked at Mab and groaned. "You see!" his miserable eyes seemed to say to her, "the something disagreeable is coming!"

He wanted badly to go over to the yacht, for, as Dorothy was still here, he yearned to be with her. He could only hope they would not keep him long; and that he would be free to go later.

They all three adjourned to Mr. Eardley's study soon after, and for a long hour and more they were shut up there together, and the old house became very still and silent.

Mrs. Eardley went up-stairs to write letters; perhaps she knew what was going on, but if she did, she made no sign. It still rained, although the wind was abating, but it was too wet to go out, and so Mab, who was never so happy at home as out of doors, sat rather idly in the drawing-room window, with a novel on her lap, and her thoughts anywhere but on its pages. She wondered very much what they were saying to Tom in the library all this long time. She loved him so unselfishly, that everything likely to vex him, hurt and pained her too. She was a very generous-hearted girl. Because he did not love her, Mab did not wish him therefore to be unhappy; on the contrary, she honestly hoped that he would somehow summon the courage to confess to his engagement to Dorothy, and that the parents and guardians on both sides would give their consent to it. It would be happier and better for both, and Mab was fain to admit that it would be happier for herself as well.

"If everybody knew of it; if they were ac-

knowledged to be lovers," she thought, "I should be able to face it, and learn to get over it quicker."

At that moment her grandfather's bell rang, and immediately afterwards the footman came in and told her that Mr. Eardley wished to speak to her in the library.

"Me!" said Mab, in surprise; "are you sure it's not Mamma that Mr. Eardley wants?"

"No, miss, it was you; I was to tell you to go at once."

Slightly puzzled, Mab rose from her chair, and put away her book. She walked rather slowly along the passage which led to her grandfather's study—she was wondering very much why she was wanted; perhaps, too, she had a presentiment of evil. There were deep embrasures to the mullioned windows all along the passage—recesses that were made by the thickness of the old walls, in each of which there stood a low ottoman seat. As she neared the door of her grandfather's room some one sprang out of one of the window recesses towards her. It was Tom, but Tom so altered from his bright cheery self, that she uttered an involuntary exclamation at the sight of him. He was very pale; there was a look of worried misery in his

usually merry eyes, and his short hair was ruffled into disorder, as though he had been sitting distractedly with his head in his hands. The sight of him was a shock to her; for what could possibly have happened to transform Tom, the practical, the light-hearted, the somewhat commonplace, if it must be admitted, into this picture of woe and despair?

CHAPTER XXI.

"WHAT is it? Something is wrong!" she cried.

"Everything is wrong!" Tom answered, despairingly, "and unless you will help me, Mab, I don't know what I shall do! You are my only hope!" Then he drew her back into the shelter of the window recess, sank down upon the cushioned seat, and laid his forehead on her hand, and Mab could feel how hotly it was throbbing. Oh, Mab, dear little friend, be good to me, I entreat you; if you fail me every hope of my life will be destroyed; it all lies in your hands."

"What does, Tom? Tell me at once. I must go to them; they have sent for me; tell me quickly. You know," she added—and there was, in spite of her utmost efforts, a quiver as of coming tears in her voice—"you know that I will do anything in the wide world I can for you, now and always! Only tell me what it is."

"They tell me that I must ask you to marry me, Mab!" She started, and drew away her hand suddenly, as though he hurt it. "My father will turn me off without a shilling in the world, he says, unless I do. And he means it—I know him so well—he means it! and grandfather backs him up."

For a moment Mab was silent; a sharp pain had shot through her heart at his first words, and now again something almost worse—a bitter contempt for Tom himself, and for the ignoble position in which he found himself.

"That is all nonsense, you know, Tom," she said, with just a little coldness in her voice. "Nobody can make people marry when—when they don't want to; and besides," with a short angry laugh, "you seem to forget me! Have I nothing to say to it, pray? This is all a put-up affair, it seems, between them, then? Our meeting here, I mean? Why didn't you refuse at once?"

"Mab, think what it means to me and to Dorothy! If my father disinherits me, Dorothy will cast me off!"

"You have a very poor opinion of Miss Duke!" said Mab, scornfully. For the life of her she could not help saying it, although she

knew it to be an ungenerous speech. "Don't be unhappy, Tom; even if you had consented to ask me to marry you—— Ah!"—breaking suddenly short at something she saw in his face —"you have consented, Tom! I can see it in your eyes—you were so mean, so cowardly!"

"Mab, it was my only chance; for God's sake put yourself in my place! What was I to do? I could do nothing more, unless I had confessed the truth. How could I say that I did not like you, when we have been so much together, you and I—such good friends. Of course I am awfully fond of you, Mab, dear; and if it wasn't for Dorothy——"

"Pray don't make any more excuses, Tom; really, they are quite unnecessary! Of course you no more want to marry me than I want to marry you; it's quite simple!" added Mab, with a little bitter laugh, and her head well in the air.

"You—you don't want it, then, either?" And somehow, if Tom's heart had been dissected, there might have been found at the very bottom of it a faint residue of cold disappointment. Tom did not, of course, want Mab to break her heart in hopeless love over himself, yet it had not been altogether unpleasant to him to hear from

his grandfather that Mab's mother believed her daughter's affections to be centered in himself.

"Make your mind quite easy on that score, Tom!" cried Mab, quite brightly, yet with a certain hardness underlying the brightness. Then, there was the sound of an opening door.

"You can rely on me," she added, in a hurried whisper. A minute later she had passed through the door into her grandfather's room.

To the end of time, the elder generations amongst us will, I imagine, continue to plan, and arrange, and map out the lives of those that are to come after them. It is an instinct which is probably inherent in human nature, yet experience should have taught mankind by now that there is very little use in doing so, for by what manifold subterfuges and quibbles have not the majority of us succeeded in rendering the wills and wishes of the dead of no avail, if not in eluding them altogether! If to lay down laws is the function of the old, to resist these laws, and to resist them for the most part successfully, is no less the prerogative of the young. When Mabel Eardley, aged twenty, stood on the hearthrug in her grandfather's room, with her hands behind her back, and uttered an empathic though perfectly unimpassioned refusal to marry

her cousin, the two men who listened to her were considerably disconcerted by the wholly unexpected check given thereby to their well-laid schemes for the benefit of their successors.

"My dear child, do you mean what you say?"

"Certainly, grandpapa. I have no wish to marry Tom."

"But I thought,—I understood,—that you were attached to one another? Surely you like Tom?"

"Very much, indeed. I am very fond of him, but I shall certainly not marry him."

"If you are fond of him, what earthly objection can you have to him?" interpolated Mr. Spinks, rather hotly.

"I have no objection whatever to Tom, personally."

"Then it is only a silly whim, a girlish caprice? You have no good or substantial reason to bring forward?"

"Indeed, I have a very good reason indeed."

"What is it, pray?"

"Well, I had rather not say it to you, Uncle Spinks. I will tell my grandfather, if he wishes."

"Rubbish! If you can tell your grandfather you can tell me!" rejoined the Birmingham

magnate, irritably. "Out with it, if you please! Is there some one else, pray—some calf love?"

"There is no one else that I know of. And I have never been the victim to the kind of malady you term calf love. If you want to know my reason, it is a very simple one. I will never exchange the name of Eardley for the name of Spinks."

A dead silence. To the millionaire this was casting down the gauntlet indeed! It was his most vulnerable point.

"*I should die of it!*" said Mab, significantly, after a pause; and therewith she caught her grandfather's eye, and there was distinctly a twinkle in it.

"You are perhaps unaware," began Tom's father, stiffly, "that the name you despise is an honest and honorable one."

"I don't doubt it, uncle, but I won't take it myself."

"My dear Mab, this is childish!" said her grandfather firmly, though the smile of amusement still lingered on his lips. Moreover, your uncle has consented, in the event of this union taking place between you and Tom, to allow you both to assume the double name of Spinks-Eardley."

Mab waved her hand impatiently.

"You would live at Portalloc—but perhaps you object to that?"

"I would like to live and die at Portalloc, grandpapa! But I won't be Mrs. Spinks, or even Mrs. Spinks-Eardley! and—I would rather I think, not talk about it any more," she added, for suddenly her fortitude failed her, and she felt as if she could not keep up the farce any longer—the farce which, if it had its comic side, had also to her its very tragic one. She turned suddenly and left the room.

CHAPTER XXII.

On board the "Sea Nymph" there had been ructions also. The visit to Portalloc, planned and carried out to please herself, had not given much satisfaction to Dorothy Duke. The passage of twenty minutes in the boat between Portalloc harbor back to the yacht had been given up to a bitter though low-voiced quarrel with the lover she did not care for, which had been possibly aggravated by the obstinate silence of the man she did like, who sat opposite her in the boat, but whose eyes wandered dreamily across the waters of the bay, and never once strayed to the beautiful face so close before him.

"I won't be made a fool of any longer," Lord Melton had said to her, angrily and rudely. "You can't expect to keep a man dangling on for ever, whilst you amuse yourself by carrying on with Dick, Tom, and Harry!—with every chap you meet, in fact."

"For a member of the aristocracy you are

singularly vulgar in your diction," remarked Miss Duke, contemptuously.

"Vulgar or no, I know what I mean, and I mean what I say. I promised to wait for a definite answer from you until the end of our cruise; but I don't promise to sit by and say nothing whilst you flirt with every man you come across—this young Spinks, for instance! Of course, you had met him before; of course you knew he was staying here; of course, that's why you were so anxious to go ashore and see this beastly old ruin; of course——"

"Have you finished?" interpolated Miss Duke, with an aggravating calmness.

The angry youth hunched his shoulders, and then suddenly the tears came into the little weak eyes, for he was wretched.

"You are very unkind to me, Dorothy!" he whined. "Here am I ready to marry you to-morrow, in spite of everything—if you'll only say 'yes'—but it's not good enough to be kept hanging on like this; and there's Tottie de Vere of the 'Folly,' who'd just jump at me any day for the asking! I've a good mind to marry her."

"For heaven's sake *do!*" cried Dorothy, furiously. "She will suit you fifty times better

than I should! I am just sick to death of you!"

The upshot of this undignified squabble was, that when, after a very rough tossing all night, the exhausted passengers of the "Sea Nymph" met towards lunch time in the main saloon, the first intelligence which greeted Dorothy was, that Lord Melton had requested to be put on shore at an early hour, and in spite of the winds and waves, the dingey had deposited him, bag and baggage, at nine o'clock in the morning, on the beach opposite the Green Dragon public-house in the village, in plenty of time to be borne away by the morning coach, which met the early train at the station, twelve miles away.

Mrs. Duke was very angry indeed at his defection, and she could scarcely be civil to her niece.

"It's your doing, of course! You have upset him, I suppose, by your interminable flirtations! For never did I see a man more likely to propose to a girl than Lord Melton was to you."

"They all propose," interpolated Miss Duke, somewhat wearily.

"Well, what could you possibly want better? —a lord, and not so badly off! Such a chance

doesn't often come to a penniless girl with nothing but her face—to say nothing of other drawbacks."

"Say nothing about them, pray, then!" retorted Dorothy, warmly. "As to Lord Melton, he is a little beast, and I'm glad he's gone."

Nevertheless his departure was a blow to her. She had made so sure of him—he was her "dark horse," the "card" she kept up her sleeve in reserve—if all other ventures failed, there was always Melton, she had said to herself, to fall back upon. He was so soft and weak, she could always make him do as she wanted.

"If you suppose that Monsieur de Vernet is going to propose to you," continued her aunt, acidly, "you make a very great mistake."

"I don't suppose it," replied Dorothy, quickly, with a heightened color; "besides, how could I possibly marry a pauper?"

But at the bottom of her heart she knew that were he only to ask her, she would go and live with him in an attic, with joy and rapture. Dorothy was rather quiet and silent all that wet and stormy day. She sat by herself in a corner of the saloon and pretended to read; she was in reality reviewing her resources.

Tom Spinks seemed now to be her only re-

maining chance, and a poor chance he had now become to her.

The glories of Portalloc had faded into thin air. She had begun to perceive that this inheritance of a ruined fortress was not exactly what her own imagination, coupled with Tom's enthusiastic but somewhat misleading descriptions, had led her to imagine. It would take thousands to put Portalloc into habitable repair, and even then, inaccessible as it was, with no neighborhood to speak of, would it ever be worth living in?

"I should die of dulness there!" she thought. Besides which, it was not even his. It was his grandfather's, and as long as he lived Mr. Eardley would be there, an incubus impossible to be rid of; and then there was Spinks *père!* How much money would Spinks be good for, if his son married her? After all, Tom could not be really a rich man until his father died, and he was not old—only fifty! He might live any time—ten, twenty, thirty years even!

Old Spinks! the thought of him arrested her. He was to be at Portalloc to-night; she had not expected to see him. Tom, indeed, was most anxious that she should not meet him. But, after all, might it not be a good thing if they

were to meet? And the fates and the clerk of the weather seemed to be in league to further this new development of circumstances.

Dorothy leaned her rounded chin upon her hand, and looked meditatively out of the port-hole window of the cabin.

The sea was still rough, but the rain was nearly over. Would it be possible to get over to Portalloc again in the evening, she wondered. And if she did get to Portalloc, would it be worth her while to take a little trouble to remain there?

"I think that I rather want to see what old Spinks is like!" said Dorothy Duke to herself, thoughtfully. And she laid her plans accordingly.

Late in the afternoon the sea went down considerably, the sky cleared, and not only was it quite possible to go to Portalloc for dinner, but there was every sign that the storm was over, and that the "Sea Nymph" would be able to put to sea on the morrow.

"If this wind holds good, captain, we shall get off all right in the morning," Dorothy overheard the skipper say to her uncle as they stood side by side on the deck, surveying a certain lightening of the clouds "in the eye of the

wind," which foretold of a favorable change of weather.

"Then we'd better be off with the turn of the tide, Dodson," replied Captain Duke, with his eyes glued to his binoculars.

"That'll be about five o'clock in the morning, sir."

"That will do nicely. See that everything is in readiness for an early start; five o'clock will suit me capitally; we shall be well out to sea before breakfast-time."

"But it will not suit me at all," thought Dorothy. "If the 'Sea Nymph' puts out of Portalloc Bay to-morrow, it is quite certain that I must not be on board her."

The party for dinner at the Castle was a reduced one. Mrs. Duke was not fond of open boats after dark, and decided to remain with her daughter, who was still tied to her cabin by her cold. There remained only the two gentlemen and Dorothy. They reached the Castle about seven o'clock, and Dorothy went at once up to Mab's room to divest herself of the disfiguring wraps and mackintoshes in which she had been forced to swathe herself. When the two girls entered the drawing-room together, some five minutes before dinner, the rest of the

party were already assembled. As the door opened Mr. Spinks looked up, and beheld a vision of beauty by which he was positively dazzled. Dorothy's yellow satin tea-gown, trimmed with laces and cut square at the neck, set off her great beauty till it was absolutely startling. Mr. Spinks breathed hard with excitement; he could not take his eyes off her. All dinner-time he stared at her in speechless admiration, as she sat opposite to him; he did not venture to address her, he only stared; and every now and then Dorothy lifted her beautiful eyes to his, and then dropped them modestly again into her plate, as though conscious of his observation. A few seconds after the ladies had left the dining-room, there was heard outside a loud scuffle, then a rumbling noise as of some one falling, followed by a stifled scream, and some hurried exclamations of horror and dismay. The gentlemen rushed with one accord to the door.

They found Miss Duke lying at the bottom of the steep winding staircase, holding her hand to her side, and groaning horribly, whilst Mab and her mother, with frightened faces, were vainly endeavoring to raise her from the ground.

CHAPTER XXIII.

CONSTERNATION and confusion pervaded the house. How the accident had exactly occurred no one could tell, but apparently Miss Duke had tripped in some way upon her long yellow satin train, and had slipped backwards down the whole length of the spiral stone staircase. She could give no answer to the torrent of questions which assailed her; she only groaned and rocked herself. "Lift her up, lift her up at once!" said Mr. Eardley; "give her air."

Tom, white as ashes, was already endeavoring to raise her in his arms, and his father and Captain Duke came promptly to his assistance. Only Achille de Vernet stood and looked on with a face of heartless unconcern.

"It's this beastly staircase!" cried Tom, with angry emphasis. "I only wonder nobody has broken their neck here before."

In spite of the catastrophe of the moment, old Mr. Eardley glared at his grandson angrily across Miss Duke's recumbent form. "The

staircases of Portalloc Castle have hitherto been considered good enough for the many generations who have gone up and down them," he remarked, with cold displeasure. "If women wore their gowns of a decent length they would not be liable to tumble down any kind of staircase."

Tom himself was far too agitated and frightened to take any heed of this speech, if, indeed, he even heard it; but Mab knew with an unerring instinct that a black mark against him had been jotted down in the old man's mind. To abuse anything in or about Portalloc was the surest way to fall into disfavor with its master. Mr. Spinks too was aware of this.

"Young fool!" he thought, impatiently. "A speech like that is quite enough to make the old boy cut him out of his will altogether, and leave the whole show to the girl!"

And Mr. Spinks was perfectly right.

Meanwhile Tom and Captain Duke between them carried Dorothy, whose height and ample proportions rendered her no feather-weight, into the study on the ground floor, where she was carefully deposited upon the sofa.

What injury she had sustained could not be known until a doctor could be summoned. There

was a country practitioner, whose skill, however, was a very doubtful matter, residing in the village; and in an emergency most people seem to think that a bad doctor is at least better than none at all. Tom immediately volunteered to set off in quest of this gentleman. "We can telegraph to Birmingham for Dr Grey to come down to-morrow morning," he observed to Captain Duke. And at this point it was that that Monsieur de Vernet observed quietly, "I really should wait, I think, before running to so much expense. Miss Duke may be very much better by to-morrow."

"Is that likely?" retorted Tom, impatiently. "You see the agony she is suffering; she has most probably sustained serious internal injuries."

Achille de Vernet shrugged his shoulders in the little French fashion which suited him so well.

"I think not," he said, drily. "If you notice, Miss Duke's lovely color has not faded in the least."

Involuntarily Tom looked. The two young men were standing by the door; Mrs. Eardley was supporting Miss Duke in her arms and fanning her, Mab was holding a salts bottle to her

nose. Mr. Eardley had sent for a glass of wine for her, and the others were looking on sympathetically, but a little helplessly. Miss Duke's eyes were closed, and she moaned at intervals in a low pathetic note of pain, but undoubtedly her cheeks retained their normal color, and her lips were of as brilliant a rose as usual.

"Cannot you see that it is the flush of pain and of fever!" cried Tom, with indignation. "But some people," he added, contemptuously, "are so case-hardened with selfishness that they can never feel for the sufferings of others!" And he went out of the room, saying to himself that this Achille de Vernet was the most brutally heartless person he had ever had the ill fortune to meet.

"But what can one expect of a dirty Frenchman?" he thought, with all the insular prejudice of a free-born Briton, as he tossed himself into an overcoat, crammed a cap on to his head, and rushed tumultuously out of the front door in quest of a horse of some kind on which to gallop madly through the night to the village, two miles away, in quest of the doctor whom nobody believed in.

Achille de Vernet walked back slowly across the low-ceiled hall with its dark oak-paneled

walls and old-world furniture, through the open door of the dining-room, where the chairs still stood about the well-lit table covered with flowers and heavy silver decorations, where he found Captain Duke on like thoughts intent, helping himself surreptitiously to a glass of port wine.

"All that is positively certain," said Monsieur de Vernet to himself, "is that Dorothy Duke does not intend to return to the 'Sea Nymph,' and does intend to remain at Portalloc; the whys and the wherefores are for the present a mystery to me! Ah! Captain Duke," he continued aloud, "you are a wise man; why should we others be cheated of our glass of port, because of ladies who fall down staircases! I will join you, my gallant Captain, in drinking to the speedy restoration of your fair niece."

"I never was so annoyed and put out in the whole course of my life!" growled Captain Duke, who looked cross, and was very red in the face. "This girl was born, I believe, to be the plague of my existence! She will have to be left here to-night, I suppose? We can't get her back to the yacht by any possible chance, I imagine, eh?"

"Perfectly out of the question. Miss Duke,

in my opinion, will remain here not only for to-night, but for many days to come."

"Well, what on earth is to become of me, I should like to know? I *must* go back, my wife would have a fit if I didn't, and I had arranged to sail in the morning, made all my plans, given all my orders. It will be simply maddening if I'm to be kept hanging on here, day after day, till this tiresome girl gets well. Do you think I must wait for her?"

"I certainly wouldn't, in your place, sir," replied Achille, who possessed the rare wisdom of always advising people to do what he saw they wished to be advised to do. "If I were you, I should stick to what I had settled to do, and sail in the morning. These kind people will take every care of your niece, and you will find, I think, that she will be perfectly satisfied to remain with them; and why should Mrs. Duke and Miss Florence have the whole pleasure of their cruise spoilt by this unfortunate, but I believe entirely trivial, accident?"

"Exactly. Why, indeed? My dear de Vernet, you are a very sensible man, and you put the whole thing in a nutshell. I shall take your advice. Dorothy is a great trouble to me. I was a fool, I dare say, as my wife always tells

me, when I undertook the charge of her. I always thought she would marry off quickly. I wish to Heaven some one would take her off my hands!" and then he sighed, and threw a furtive glance in the direction of his companion. But de Vernet sipped his port wine imperturbably, and gave no sign, and Captain Duke went on after a brief pause:

"Of course, I don't want to be unkind, and I am sure I hope the poor girl isn't much hurt. I should be very sorry if she were. I shall, of course, ask our friend Eardley to procure the best advice for her to-morrow if she is no better; this local doctor may not be equal to her case."

"I think the local doctor will do all that is necessary, sir. I am a bit of a doctor myself. Did I ever tell you I studied medicine as a youngster in Paris? Only my father was bent upon my entering the diplomatic service, or else I should have adopted the medical profession by choice. However, I know quite enough as it is to be certain that there is nothing seriously amiss with Miss Duke. A little shaken, perhaps; possibly she may have bruised her side a little in falling; one can't let one's self go right down a stone-staircase without sustaining a few bruises or even a strain, or a rick of some

kind; but I observed her carefully, and, take my word for it, there is nothing to be alarmed at."

"Well, I am glad to hear you say so, de Vernet. As you are a medico yourself, would you, perhaps, like to go and examine her professionally?"

"I am perfectly certain," replied Achille, with a laugh, "that however much I might desire to offer my services to your niece, she herself would be the last to desire or appreciate them. No! I will leave her in all confidence to the tender mercies of the local blunderer!"

"Then will you do something else for me, de Vernet?"

"Anything, gladly, if I can serve you, Captain."

"Well, supposing our kind host will put you up for to-night, will you stop here, and come on board in the morning, so as to bring us the last news of Dorothy? It would seem rather heartless, I think, to go away without even knowing how she is, and I will delay my departure for a few hours, which will make no practical difference to me, so that I shall be able to send the gig accross for you in the morning. Dorothy will want her clothes, too, if she is to

stay here, and her aunt must pack a box for her, which the gig will also bring, and she can fetch you back; you will then be able to give us the latest news of her."

Monsieur de Vernet had no possible objection to offer to this arrangement, and agreed willingly to do as Captain Duke suggested; and, Mr. Eardley coming in at this moment, the matter was referred to him. He assented gladly at once, and rang the bell to order a room to be instantly prepared for Monsieur de Vernet.

"And, of course, we shall keep Miss Duke until she is able to rejoin you, Captain," he added, hospitably.

Captain Duke then took his leave almost immediately, and Achille was left at Portalloc for the night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MEANWHILE a somewhat curious little scene had been taking place in the adjoining room, where Miss Duke, still arrayed in her yellow satin tea-gown, lay motionless and prostrate, in suffering loveliness, upon the sofa.

Mrs. Eardley, whose weak heart had been considerably shaken by the accident, had gone up-stairs, nevertheless, to superintend the preparation of a bedroom for the sufferer, and Mab, who excelled greatly in all matters pertaining to the nursing of the sick, having been carefully trained in the rudiments of the art, had, on her own responsibility, gone to the kitchen to make a linseed poultice to apply to Miss Duke's injured side.

Captain Duke had, as we have seen, returned to the port wine in the deserted dining-room. Mr. Eardley, seeing that he could be of no use, had very soon followed him thither, whilst Tom had gone for the doctor.

And so it happened, strangely enough, that

the only person left with the heroine of this distressful accident was Mr. Spinks, the father. Old Spinks sat gazing at the prostrate beauty, with a face red with disturbance, and eyes filled with a most comical despondency. He didn't know in the least what to do, or what to say, but he knew that he felt very uncomfortable.

Presently Miss Duke opened her lovely eyes and fixed them upon him, and a faint smile flickered over her features.

"Dear Mr. Spinks!" she murmured, stirring her long-fingered white hand feebly in the direction of his. Mr. Spinks put forth his, red as a lobster and rough as a laborer's, and gripped it firmly. "So good of you to stay with me!" she whispered.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry, I'd give anything on earth to see you better. You must have the best doctors down from London and Birmingham to-morrow."

"Oh, great doctors are too expensive, I couldn't afford it!"

"But I can, and I insist upon it—it shall be my affair—I'll see to it."

"You are too sweet and generous, but I couldn't hear of it! I dare say I shall be much better in the morning."

"You won't be fit to leave this house for a week!" replied Mr. Spinks, with emphasis.

"No, I am afraid not!" and Dorothy sighed. "I feel I *cannot* go back to that yacht!—I should be shaken to pieces with this pain; I believe I ought not to go to sea for some time after this."

"Of course not! It would be madness! You must stay here," with decision.

"It will be giving them all so much trouble——"

"As if any one would consider it a trouble to do anything for you!"

A little feeble laugh, and a faint pressure of the hand.

"Oh, everybody is not as kind as you are, dear Mr. Spinks—and you, alas! will, I fear, be gone by Monday!"

"I take my oath I won't stir out of this house until you are well enough to go out of it too."

The words were whispered feverishly, almost passionately into her ear, as Mr. Spinks bent low over the sofa.

Dorothy started a little, and her eyes opened widely up at his. What she saw in that vulgar and unattractive face I cannot say, but that she did see something surprising in it, and that

that something gave her a lively satisfaction, is evident from her low-voiced reply.

"Ah, dear Mr. Spinks, one does not often meet any one so good, so considerate, so sympathetic as you are! You can't think what it is to me to find all at once a friend like yourself!—a lonely orphan as I am, dependent for my very bread on the charity of relations, who are neither very congenial nor very kind! Ah, you cannot imagine what a sad life mine has hitherto been!"

"By Jove! such a girl as you needn't be dependent on anybody's charity!" exclaimed Spinks *père*, warmly. "One don't see looks like yours every day! You might ride in your own carriage and pair, and be smothered in diamonds and laces, whenever you chose—any day, I tell you! any day!"

"Old Spinks is progressing rapidly," thought Miss Duke, "almost too rapidly, in fact. I had better repress him a little." And aloud she said, whilst she withdrew her hand gently out of his, "Oh, now you are making fun of me, Mr. Spinks; besides, I am not that sort of girl at all. When you know me better you will see how little I care for riches. I don't want to marry any one for money—that has never been my ambition. I only want happiness and love,

and to meet some heart who will beat in unison with my own!"

"Your room is quite ready, Dorothy. I am going to get one of the gentlemen to help to carry you up to it. Oh!" Mab stood in the doorway, but the startled exclamation at the end of her remark betrayed her sudden and almost scandalized amazement at the sight that met her eyes.

Tom's father, bending low over Tom's betrothed, holding her hand in his, and gazing into her eyes with the leering looks of a lovelorn satyr! How horrible, how perfectly disgusting! Mab's generous heart would have flown out in ready sympathy with any woman whose helplessness subjected her to such a revolting ordeal.

"I ought not to have left her," she thought, sweeping up to the sofa, "but who could have believed that old wretch would have persecuted her with his detestable attentions! Poor Dorothy! how she must loathe him, and yet for Tom's sake I suppose she dare not offend the old brute!"

"We must get you up-stairs to bed before the doctor comes," she said, authoritatively, with an air of taking possession of the patient.

"Uncle Spinks, will you please go and tell grandpapa we want him; he and the footman will be quite able to help Miss Duke up-stairs."

"Excuse me, my dear Mabel, I shall do nothing of the sort. I intend to carry Miss Duke up-stairs to her room myself."

"Oh, I am sure Dorothy would rather not give you the trouble," began Mab, impulsively; then she stopped short, and looked with uneasy amazement from one to the other.

Dorothy was smiling gratefully up at Mr. Spinks.

"How too, too good of you!" she murmured. "Are you sure you can carry me up-stairs, dear Mr. Spinks—I am so very heavy—will it not be too much for you?"

"Not in the least; I am very strong, and I know I could carry you for miles," he replied, confidently.

And then and there, accordingly, whilst Mab stood looking on in helplessness and bewilderment, Mr. Spinks picked up Miss Duke in his arms, and carried her up to her bedroom.

CHAPTER XXV.

In course of time Tom returned with the local doctor. He was at once taken up to Miss Duke's room, where he said very little, and seemed to have no practical suggestions to make. He remarked, however, that the accident might be tedious, but was not, he believed, serious, and he ordered linseed poultices, which Mab had already applied, to be kept on through the night, and changed every two hours. And then he went away promising to come again in the morning.

"Somebody must sit up with the poor thing!" said Mrs. Eardley wearily to her daughter, when he had taken his departure. She was pale herself, and overwrought with the extra exertion she had already gone through.

"Then it certainly will not be you, mother dear, for you look completely fagged out already!" replied Mab, with decision. "Go to bed at once, and I will see to everything; you know what a good nurse I am."

"It seems hardly fair on you, Mab," demurred her mother; "why shouldn't Jane the housemaid sit up?"

"I am quite sure Jane couldn't prepare a linseed poultice to save her life! Girls who go out to service in these days seem to be able to do very little that is useful; it will be much better for me to sit up; I shall really like to do it."

She meant what she said, for she thought that Tom would feel happier if she were in charge of the invalid.

Tom was grateful to her, and thanked her warmly, almost with tears in his eyes, when he wished her good night.

"It's awfully good of you, Mab dear, and just like you! You can't think what a relief it is to me to think you will be with my poor darling! I am so horribly anxious about her! If she is not better I must have first-rate advice for her to-morrow. I would sooner own our engagement, and take it upon myself to send to Birmingham for Dr Grey, than let her run the slightest risk."

"Well, we shall see how she is in the morning," said Mab, soothingly.

"And if you think she is any worse in the

night, you will be sure to come and knock me up, Mab? I could help you to nurse her."

"My dear boy! the murder would be out then with a vengeance!" laughed Mab.

"What would that signify, if it is a matter of life or death?"

"Oh, it won't be that, Tom! I think I can promise you that at least! I don't profess to be a doctor, but I have had a good deal of experience in sick-nursing, and I think I know enough to feel sure there is no cause for alarm at all."

"But that horrible pain she is suffering! What can it be? her moans are positively heart-rending! She seems to be in agony."

"Yes, it certainly is rather strange about the pain," replied Mab, thoughtfully; "that doctor couldn't account for it at all; it seems to be intermittent too, which is curious; a little while ago, for instance, when your father carried her up-stairs, she seemed in no pain at all, and it all came back again when the doctor was here."

"It was very good of the governor to be so kind to my poor girl," said Tom, with feeling. "She has evidently quite won his heart!" he added, with a little smile of pride and satisfaction.

"Evidently," assented Mab.

Then Tom wished her good night, and Mab went into Miss Duke's room to begin her night's watch.

The household at Portalloc retired early to rest; by half-past eleven, Mr. Eardley himself and all the servants had gone to bed. Only the lights were left burning in the hall and passages, so that Mab might see her way down to the kitchen, where the fire was made up, and hot water left ready, for her to prepare the poultices as they were required.

The only other person who by midnight was awake in the whole house besides Mab was Monsieur Achille de Vernet. He was one of those men to whom sleep is physically impossible before the small hours of the morning. Long habits of the late hours of fashionable life had become second nature to him. When Mr. Eardley and Mr. Spinks had professed themselves ready to go to bed at about eleven o'clock, Achille had asked if he might be permitted to sit up for some time longer with his pipe and his book. Tom, who, in spite of his anxiety, was dog tired, declared that he was unable to keep awake any longer, and followed his grandfather up-stairs; first, to find Mab, as we have

seen, and then to seek his room and tumble into bed as quickly as he could; and then, despite his love and his grief, he soon fell fast asleep with the deep sleep of a thoroughly healthy mind and body.

And so Achille was left alone.

He smoked a great deal and he read a little, and he thought more than he did either.

His thoughts took a totally new and unaccustomed direction. He was calculating his financial resources, present and future. There was his pay, which was inconsiderable at present, but which might be reasonably expected soon to rise to a more imposing figure; he was clever, he was popular, and he had interest. He had been lazy, hitherto, but he felt within himself capabilities of becoming industrious, and he did not see why some of the plums of diplomacy should not come his way as well as any other. For the rest, he had a small competency of his own, the legacy of a doting godmother, and at his father's death there would be a third portion of his father's fortune divided equally, according to French custom, between himself and his two elder brothers. He had, moreover, the remote possibility of inheriting some West Indian property on the death of a maternal uncle.

"The question is," said Monsieur de Vernet to himself, as he reviewed the situation and stretched up his arms above his fair head, "should I be justified in asking any woman to marry me on such uncertain prospects? I don't suppose she herself will have much, and whatever she may eventually have, I should like her to keep entirely for herself. I would rather not take that into consideration. I would sooner feel that I could keep my wife in comfort, independent of any small fortune she might have. How circumstances alter cases! How little I thought a week ago that I should be making such calculations or seriously considering the problem of marriage! What a change it would be to me to marry on such purely unworldly terms as these! I should have to alter all my mode of life. I have been desperately extravagant, I know, and I should have to retrench and be prudent,—to give up my hack and my buggy. I might perhaps be satisfied with a bicycle!" he added, with a grim smile at his own expense. "But, by Heaven! It would be worth it a thousand times over if I could win her! What a treasure of a wife she would be! I understand now what people mean when they say that English women make the most ideal wives

of any women on earth. The right sort of English women, they ought to say. I have met the wrong sort up to now—very much the wrong sort, I should say!" he added, with something between a smile and a sneer hovering on his characteristic face.

The clock on the mantelshelf struck two. Achille roused himself from his reveries with a little start, and decided that it was time to go to bed.

He opened the door and went into the hall. The dim light of one oil lamp in a far corner pervaded it. The house was intensely still and silent; so that instinctively he stepped softly across the Persian rugs that covered the black and white diamond-shaped flags of the pavement.

A clock on some upper landing struck the hour—the two reverberations rang distinctly and a little weirdly through the stillness.

At that moment a door in the dusky gloom beyond the spiral staircase opened softly, and a figure clothed in white from head to foot appeared in the opening.

De Vernet stopped short with an involuntary start.

"Allons donc!" he muttered, "il ne manquait que çà! It is the family ghost, apparé-

ment!" And for half a second the strong influence of the supernatural, which lies dormant in every one of us, however practical and strong-minded we may be, froze his blood, and quickened his breath a little.

And then in the next moment the advancing figure passed into the pale radiance of the lamp, and he recognized the face of the ghost.

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was Mab, clad from neck to heel in a long straight garment, which fell in soft folds of white cashmere in virginal whiteness about her. Never had she seemed to him more fair, more pure, more womanly; in her hand she carried a heavy black saucepan, unromantic utensil enough in itself, but ennobled and idealized by the ministering charity of her who carried it. The black and sooty object emphasized the snowy whiteness of her wrapper; her hair was a little disordered, and fell loosely about her face and neck, and he noticed that she looked very tired, and that there were dark circles around her eyes.

The sight made him grind his teeth in impotent indignation. The next moment she lifted her eyes and saw him standing before her in the gloom of the dimly-lit hall.

She uttered a little exclamation of confusion, and the color rushed in a flood to her face.

"Oh, Monsieur de Vernet! how you startled me!"

"And you me, Mademoiselle! I took you for the ghost of a murdered Portalloc!"

Mab still stood immovable, with crimson cheek and lowered eyes. To encounter a young man in the small hours of the morning was a naturally embarrassing position, and more especially did she realize it to be so, as she recollected that her costume was not originally designed for the bold eyes of man to rest upon. Any woman would have experienced a sense of bashful awkwardness in such a situation. But Mab was a very sensible girl, and a moment later she told herself that her loose flowing garments were really as modest and as seemly as any dress could possibly be, and that there was nothing at all to be ashamed of at being caught in such a guise.

So with a perfectly natural smile and simple manner, she lifted her eyes to the young man's and said lightly:

"How late you are! I had no idea that any one but myself was awake in the house!"

"I am always rather late," replied Achille, thinking at the same time how strong a weapon of defense was a true womanly purity. "A bad habit of bachelorhood, you will say! Miss Eardley, you are never going to carry that heavy

sooty saucepan up-stairs? Give it to me directly."

"Oh, it's not so very heavy. I've carried it up from the kitchen once already. I managed it very well, I assure you."

"Good heavens! It is an iniquity that you should be made to slave in this way, and lose your night's rest, and wear yourself out!" he cried, indignantly; and with that he took the saucepan forcibly out of her hands.

"Oh, but I really like to do it, Monsieur de Vernet," answered Mab. "I volunteered to sit up with poor Dorothy."

He was preceding her up the staircase; the saucepan was certainly heavy, and the hot fumes of the boiling linseed came up in oily breaths into his face.

"*Poor Dorothy* indeed!" he repeated, scornfully, turning back towards her as he reached the landing. "How is it that such a farce has taken you all in? Cannot you see that she is no more hurt than I am?"

Mab stared at him with horror-struck eyes.

"You mean—you mean," she faltered, "that you think—she is *shamming!*"

"I don't think; I know," he replied, with a little nod of the head.

"You don't believe that she is hurt?" persisted Mab, with warmth. "Oh, but this is unjust and cruel! Do you suppose a person could have a fall like that, from the top to the bottom of a stone staircase, and not be hurt?"

"But what if she fell on purpose?" replied Achille, with a little shrug of the shoulders.

Mab colored hotly; a generous indignation prompted her to deny the damaging suggestion altogether, but in the next moment she felt that this open accusation chimed in but too well with a secret suspicion which had already been gaining ground in the depths of her own heart.

"What you say is dreadful!" she rejoined in a whisper, for they were by now close outside the invalid's door. "I cannot, cannot believe that any one could be so deceitful! and besides, what motive could there possibly be for it?"

"Ah, as to motive, I confess I am puzzled! But I know *la belle Dorothée* very well, Miss Eardley. I know her to be *intrigant jusqu'au bout des ongles.* She has some game to play here; perhaps you know what that game may be better than I do?" and he bent his eyes searchingly upon her. Mab colored; she could make no reply. Naturally it seemed to

her that Monsieur de Vernet must have noticed Tom's devotion. Could he also have divined the secret engagement between her cousin and Miss Duke?

Mab thought that it must be so, and her tongue was tied. If Dorothy had planned this accident so as to remain longer with her lover, and in order to ingratiate herself with his father, how could she blame her over-much? The means she had taken were certainly somewhat dishonest, but the end might possibly justify the means. And Mab, who always tried to believe the best of everybody, told herself that assuredly this must be the motive—the only motive that could have induced Miss Duke to deceive them all so desperately.

"In time no doubt we shall all find out what Miss Duke's object has been," said Achille, answering her silence, as he resigned the smoking saucepan into her hands. "But meanwhile it renders me perfectly furious to think that *you* should be kept trotting up and down every half hour with these disgusting poultices!"

"Oh! not every half hour, Monsieur de Vernet!" laughed Mab softly. "Every two hours."

"*Mon Dieu!* Every two hours, and it is now

two o'clock! then again at four o'clock, I suppose?"

Mab nodded and smiled back at him over her shoulder as she disappeared noiselessly into the sick-room.

Two hours later, when Mab crept softly again out of Dorothy Duke's room, what was her surprise to find Monsieur de Vernet still fully dressed, seated in an old-fashioned leather arm-chair which stood in a corner of the landing outside.

This time she was really fairly startled, and almost dropped the saucepan in her surprise and amazement; he sprang forward and took it out of her hands.

"Now you sit down here in this chair," he said, placing her forcibly into the seat from which he had just arisen. "You must wait quietly here; I am going to do this disgusting business for you!"

Mab could not help laughing. "Why, Monsieur de Vernet, you must be out of your senses! You have never been to bed at all!"

"Do you suppose you are the only person in world who has a right to ruin their health by sitting up all night?" he retorted, with a

smile. "Sit still and rest, I tell you, and leave the poultice to me!"

"How foolish you are! As if you could possibly prepare a linseed poultice!"

"I have prepared hundreds!" and seeing her look of utter surprise, he added, laughingly: "I must explain to you that I once studied as a medical student in the Paris hospitals. I understand all these sordid details very well, I assure you; it is only by the merest accident that I am not a full-blown medical practitioner at this day."

The explanation seemed to satisfy her, and wondering a little at his pertinacity, she laid her head wearily against the back of the chair, and allowed him to have his own way. She was, in truth, almost too tired to fight it out with him, for Dorothy Duke had kept her upon her feet incessantly the whole night long on one pretense or other. Dorothy was so anxious to act up to her part, that as a matter of fact she rather over-acted it, so much so that the conviction that she was indeed shamming, as Monsieur de Vernet had said, had come more and more home to Mab during the last hour. She was certain, after a while, that Miss Duke's moans of pain were simulated; she was almost

certain that she was in no pain at all. Nevertheless, like a martyr to a forlorn cause, Mab told herself that she must continue to carry out the doctor's orders religiously and conscientiously.

And just now she was not thinking about Dorothy Duke at all. She was thinking of Achille de Vernet, and wondering why on earth she had found him sitting waiting for her outside the door. She was destined to discover the reason very soon.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MAB had undergone a great variety of distracting emotions during the last four-and-twenty hours. She could not forget that earlier in the day she had played into Tom's hands, and bitterly disappointed her grandfather by refusing to marry her cousin. For her own pride's sake, as well as for Tom's happiness, she knew that she could not possibly have done otherwise, yet the effort of rejecting the man she secretly loved had been very bitter to her, and she was sincerely sorry, too, to have been obliged to grieve and disappoint the old man who had been so kind to her. The memory of those few moments alone with her cousin, when he had implored her to save him by refusing to marry him, were unspeakably galling and humiliating to her; but deep as was her sense of shame, and keen as was the pain, there was underlying it all a new conviction, which was still more bitter to her than all the rest. For she knew that her idol had fallen in her estimation! There was something unworthy, unmanly almost,

in the attitude which Tom had taken up; for, granted that he was driven distracted between his love and his fears; granted that he was tied on every side by his promises to his betrothed on the one hand, and by his dread of arousing his father's anger on the other; granted, again, that his character was too simple and straightforward to wrestle with any hope of success against the conflicting elements which entangled him; granting all this, even then Mab's common sense and common honesty told her that Tom had no right to thrust the whole onus of the refusal upon her. It had been a mean thing to feign consent himself, and to fall back upon her to save him from the consequences of his own cowardice. Mab told herself over and over again, with a passionate and almost pitiful persistence, that she did not love Tom one iota less for it, that he was still the dearest of all men to her, yet, at the very bottom of her heart, she knew perfectly well that if she loved him as well, she undoubtedly respected him less, and with that conviction there came home to her the unbearable thought that there might be a finality in love.

She had known Tom but a short time; he had attracted her because he was not as others

had seemed to her; he was pleasant-mannered, and sunny in temper and in disposition; they had been thrown together, and she had learned to love him quickly, and almost unconsciously. Was it possible that she had filled in the details of the sketch too entirely out of her own imagination? Had she made a hero out of a good-natured, but very ordinary young man? And was the process of disillusion beginning with her already?

Mab was far too loyal by nature not to battle with all her might and main against these distracting suggestions, which, flitting as yet but vaguely across her mind, caused her, nevertheless, so hideous a pain, that to fight against them, and vanquish them, seemed to her to be her only chance of future peace and safety. For there is no evolution of the human mind so cruel, and so heartrending, as disenchantment.

It was perhaps fortunate for her, that in the confusion caused by Dorothy Duke's accident, and detention at Portalloc, she had no time to think very much of her own secret troubles. Miss Duke's tumble had at least done this good thing for Mab, it had given her plenty to do. Nevertheless, during the long watches of the night there had been many moments when the

blackness of miserable thoughts had come upon her again and again—times, too, when she had cast shame and blame upon herself—when Tom's good-night words and grateful eyes haunted her with a sense of her own injustice and unkindness, and when she alternately shrank in spirit from his faults and weaknesses, or told herself, in an abandonment of enthusiasm and of self-abnegation, that she only loved him all the better for them!

And then, as though it had been determined by some spirit of mockery to sweep upon every chord of her sensitive heart during the short space of time betwixt one dawn and the next—something new happened to poor Mab, something so amazing, and so thoroughly outside all her calculations, that it only seemed to her, for many days afterwards, that she had been the temporary victim of some hallucination of mind.

Achille de Vernet came back to her; she did not know how long he had been away: it might have been ten minutes—it might have been twenty. When he came back, she rose to thank him and to take the saucepan from his hands, but he set it down upon the parquet floor, and turned to her.

"It is very hot; it will keep," he said shortly. "Mademoiselle, there is something I have to say to you." And she saw that there was a look in his eyes which she had not seen there before. She could not understand it in the least. She looked at him expectantly, and a little wonderingly, but she made no answer. By the dull light of a lamp half way down the passage, she saw his face for the first time with a new significance; his figure was in the shadow, framed in by the dark oak of the panelled passage, but out of the gloom of the background, Achille de Vernet's face seemed to be strongly accentuated. Mab saw, what she had never noticed before, that it was a strong face, full of power and of determination; whatever this man might do, he would do with all his might; whatever he might desire he would pursue with every fiber of his being. Something in his very attitude commanded her earnest attention.

"Have I your leave to speak, Mademoiselle?"

She bowed her head in assent.

"What I have to say to you will, perhaps, surprise you; it has come as a surprise to myself. I only beg that it may not offend you."

"Oh, no, surely! You could not offend me,"

she answered, gently and kindly; but not the remotest idea of his meaning had as yet entered her mind.

"Miss Eardley, I have known you but since three days ago. Yet there are some persons, whom to know three days is to have known forever. You are one of these. I have no more doubt of what you are than if I knew you to be one of the holy women of old, come back to revisit the world."

"Oh, Monsieur de Vernet!"

"I say this, not to flatter you, Mademoiselle, for flattery is unworthy of you, but to show you how much in earnest I am. We are all the slaves of circumstances. I am, as you know, obliged to go away from here to-morrow morning—this morning, I should say; I shall probably not see you again before I go, certainly not alone. That is why I am compelled to take this chance, which fate has thrown in my way. It is only the fool or the coward who does not know how to make use of opportunity. And so, at the risk of offending you, with the almost certainty of startling, and, perhaps, distressing you, I am compelled to speak openly and with undue suddenness."

Still Mab looked at him wonderingly and

uncomprehendingly, meeting the full light of eyes that were almost stern in their burning intensity, with an upturned glance of mute and inquiring curiosity.

For a moment he paused as though fearing to speak; then suddenly he said, in a low voice, which vibrated strangely to the intensity of his feeling:

"Miss Eardley, you are the only woman on earth I have ever wished to marry; can you give me any hope?"

"Oh, Monsieur de Vernet! You must be dreaming!"

"I have startled you! I knew that I should. I have risked that. Listen, do not turn away; is it so wonderful after all? You are good, you are true, you are pure. Such women as you are not common, and one recognizes their worth by instinct. I love you. There is nothing strange in that. Love is a giant; he comes upon us unprepared and by stealth, and in a moment we are vanquished. That I should love you, should not cause you any astonishment. Love comes not for the bidding, but when he comes, he comes with power: there can be no possible mistake as to his meaning."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

So far, Mab had listened spellbound; his low musical voice held her enthralled. She stood, half turned away, with lowered eyes and glowing cheeks. She knew, indeed, that soon she must stop him and send him away—for did she not love Tom? And how could words of love from any other man touch her, even remotely? And yet she could not help listening to him, as he had asked her to do—unto the end.

Neither he nor she, in the absorbing excitement of the moment, were aware of the fact that Miss Duke's door, just now, softly opened a very little way, and that a white face, shrouded in gloom, was pressed closely to the opening.

"I am not such a conceited idiot," went on the young man, "as to imagine that I have made the least advance in your estimation; nor am I so vain as to believe that you have as yet given me a thought; all that I wish you to know at present is that I care for you, and that I am not

in the least likely to change my mind. All that I want to ask from you is, whether I have any chance for the future, if I come back again to Portalloc. I should be but a poor match for you, Miss Eardley, although I have my profession, and the will and the brain to work; but you are not one of those who consider the mercenary side of marriage."

Mab made a quick gesture of dissent.

"Tell me only—tell me truly from your heart—whether you are free?—whether I should have a chance of winning you like any other, or whether there is any insuperable barrier to your ever becoming my wife? If you tell me that there is, I will wish you farewell for ever; if not——"

Then Mab spoke at last; honor bade her remain no longer silent; it seemed to her as though, although Tom was nothing to her, yet it was disloyal to Tom to let this man, who was but a stranger—a foreigner and a stranger—continue to plead his love; for what was any man to her, save only Tom?

"Monsieur de Vernet," she cried, turning her blushing face towards him, "you have done me a great honor; I do not think that I am in the least worthy of your good opinion of me."

Achille smiled, and made a little gesture of deprecation. "But you must say no more—you must forget—this—this foolish fancy; you must go away, and it will be best—much best—that you do not come back here."

"There *is* an insuperable barrier, then?" he asked, anxiously.

She nodded, and her lips formed the word "Yes," although no sound came from them.

"You are already betrothed?"

"Oh, no."

"Then some other, worthier than I am, loves you?"

She shook her head sadly, and the moisture of tears welled up into her eyes.

"I am afraid not!" Then, seeing the light of a sudden hope in his eyes, she added, quickly: "Pray, ask me no more; I cannot tell you. Only believe me, what you wish is quite impossible! Leave me now, I entreat you!" she continued, with uncontrollable emotion, as the brimming tears that filled her eyes fell down over her cheeks. "Indeed, I can bear no more—go, I implore you!"

Her distress, the sight of her tears, her unconvincing denial, disturbed his heart, but failed to satisfy his mind. But Achille de

Vernet had the blood of an honorable family in his veins, and never had one of his race persecuted a woman against her wish.

Her word became law to him; he bent low over her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Mademoiselle, I obey you, and go. Yet I cannot lose all hope, nor refuse to believe that time and your own heart may yet move you towards me. I shall come back one day, and see you again. Meanwhile, farewell."

Then, with a gentle pressure of the hand he still held, he turned and left her.

Before he did so, the door of Miss Duke's room was once more tightly closed.

For a moment Mab remained standing where she was, bewildered still, and scarcely realizing what had taken place. Somehow, the passage felt very cold and dark to her after Achille had disappeared along it, and now, for the first time, she saw that the gray light of dawn had begun to creep coldly from behind the curtained windows of the landing. Mab shivered as she stooped to pick up the heavy kitchen saucepan from the floor where the young man had deposited it.

"The romance of a linseed poultice!" she muttered between her teeth, with a little faint

laugh that was almost hysterical. "How Tom would laugh if he knew! Did ever girl have so sensational a declaration of love as this: attired in a dressing-gown, and at four o'clock in the morning, and with an iron saucepan and a poultice for the basis of operations! How intensely ridiculous! And what a foolish person this Monsieur de Vernet is! How can he really love a girl he has only known for three days! Frenchmen are very imaginative, I suppose; but how absurd! It is like a farce, and yet there was not much farce in his face! He meant it, I am sure. He was in deadly earnest! Poor Monsieur de Vernet!"—and Mab sighed, and the sigh was genuine, and arose perhaps from profounder depths than she knew of herself. She picked up the saucepan and entered Miss Duke's room. Her patient lay in a deep and peaceful slumber; her soft and regular breathing filled the silence of the room. Mab listened to it for a minute or two, and then set the saucepan gently down on the fender.

"She is sleeping beautifully," she thought. "No need to awake her now. Whether it is all real, or whether, as he said, it is three parts shamming—any way, such a profound sleep as this must do her all the good in the world."

And, after another long watch of over half an hour, Mab settled that she was no longer needed, and that she might with an easy conscience go away to her own room and seek a little rest herself, after the many agitations and fatigues of the night.

No sooner had she safely gone than Dorothy opened her eyes and slipped out of bed. She crossed the room quickly towards a writing-table, which stood in the embrasure of one of the windows. And, drawing back the curtain, she sat down in the shivering light of the gray dawning and began to write. Miss Duke, sitting there in her thin nightdress, and with her bare feet upon the parquet flooring, felt, nevertheless, neither cold nor pain at that moment; because, next to love, the passion which warms the heart the most, and, through the heart, the body also, is the passion of hatred.

It was hatred and jealousy which now glowed like fire through her veins.

When she had finished the letter, and addressed it, with a large "Immediate" in the left-hand corner of the envelope, she got back into bed, and waited.

After what seemed to her an interminable time, a housemaid came into the room to light

the fire, which, in spite of the time of the year, seemed indispensable to a room of sickness. The girl inquired civilly of Miss Duke how she felt this morning.

"I am feeling very unwell," replied the young lady, plaintively. "Will you do something for me, my good girl?"

"Certainly, Miss."

"Take this letter to the French gentleman, when you go to call him, presently. He is returning very early to the yacht, and I want him to ask my aunt, Mrs. Duke, for some things I particularly want to be sent to me before the yacht sails."

Achille received the letter in his bed.

"*Mon cher ami*," wrote Dorothy. "A sleepless invalid could not avoid overhearing some few words of the conversation which went on, close outside her door, in the night. I have always been your true friend, Achille; forgive me if I give you a friendly hint: do not make a fool of poor little Mab Eardley. She is engaged to be married to her cousin, the only son of the vulgar millionaire. It is a 'marriage de convenance,' which, she tells me, has been definitely arranged, quite lately, between the parents on both sides. Mab Eardley is quite

portionless, and as the cousin is to inherit this old Castle, as well as all his father's wealth, it is an excellent match for her. Be generous, and do not unsettle her or disturb her peace of mind by attentions which might only lead her to sacrifice the whole of her future to a mere caprice. She told me she was perfectly content to marry her cousin, and no wonder, as I understand the settlements will be princely! I am better, but still far from feeling well.—Your sincere friend, DOROTHY DUKE."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE "Sea Nymph" spread her white wings, and sailed away out of Portalloc Bay; whilst Miss Duke remained an inmate of Portalloc Castle.

She did not, however, keep long to the seclusion of her bedroom. For no sooner had the yacht disappeared below the horizon than the fair Dorothy left her bed, and declared herself to be marvelously better.

She had pronounced herself to be perfectly satisfied with the treatment of the village doctor; and by what spells she exercised this functionary I cannot say, but, after a second interview with him, she got him to prescribe exactly what she wanted, and to declare her case to be that which she had settled she wanted it to be.

The worthy man told Mr. Eardley that the young lady had sprained her side, but that already she was much better, that she only required perfect rest and to lie upon the sofa, that she need not keep her bed, and that if she

could be brought down-stairs, the society of other people would be beneficial to her. He ordered her champagne to drink, and anything to eat that she might fancy.

So the second day after the accident, Miss Duke, an interesting and beautiful convalescent, disposed her graceful limbs upon a sofa in the drawing-room, which was wheeled conveniently into a window for her reception. Here, surrounded by flowers and fruit, by novels and magazines, fed with good things, and sustained by Mr. Eardley's best Veuve Cliquot, she proceeded to pass an exceedingly agreeable existence.

Mab gave her very little of her society at this stage of her illness. Truth to say, Dorothy did not encourage her to do so; and Mab had a new and more serious anxiety on her mind: Mrs. Eardley had never got over the upset and the shock which Dorothy's accident had caused her. It transpired that she had tried to lift Dorothy when she first fell at the bottom of the stairs. Miss Duke was heavy and Mrs. Eardley was fragile, and, moreover, her heart was constitutionally weak. Mab feared more and more as the days went by, and her mother still remained prostrate, that

she had done herself some serious injury by her efforts.

Mrs. Eardley was unable to leave her room, and Mab naturally was in constant attendance upon her.

Dorothy Duke, however, did not seem to miss the society of the two ladies in the least. She saw Mab now only at meal times, and made careless inquiries after her mother's health, scarcely often listening to the answer to her questions.

Mab attempted some sort of apology once for her long and unavoidable absences in her mother's room, but Dorothy begged her not to distress herself.

"I do very well, I assure you, Mab."

"You have Tom," said Mab, meaningly.

"Yes, I have Tom, of course—dear Tom!" she replied. "He is so kind and attentive!"

"Why does his father stay so long? He was only to come from Friday to Monday originally, and here is Thursday and no sign of his going! What keeps him?"

Miss Duke shrugged her shoulders.

"How can I tell? Perhaps Mr. Eardley has asked him to stay."

"Hardly, I should say. Grandpapa detests

him, I believe. And I don't wonder. He is a horrid man, I think; so different to Tom!" And Mab could not help looking keenly at her companion, for lately a vague suspicion of a most disagreeable character had stolen into her mind.

But Miss Duke neither faltered nor blushed.

"Oh, 'horrid' is a strong word, my dear! He is not very refined or handsome, certainly; but I don't find old Spinks half bad, I assure you; he is very kind, and has a good heart, I think."

"And I suppose you have tried to make friends with him entirely for Tom's sake, Dorothy?" persisted Mab, with a little significance in her look and voice.

"Yes, entirely for Tom's sake, as you say," she replied, with decision; and Mab was forced to be content, and hoped that there was no foundation but her own fancy for that most unpleasant thought of hers.

After that it was noticeable that never again did she find Mr. Spinks alone by Dorothy's sofa when she came down-stairs at regular intervals from her mother's room. It was always Tom who was in attendance; yet his father remained on, and there was no mention of his visit coming to an end.

One day Mrs. Eardley spoke to her daughter concerning Tom.

"Your grandfather told me, Mab, that you have definitely refused to marry him. Have you quite made up your mind, my dear?" she said, reaching out her frail hand, and laying it upon her child's.

"Quite, mother. I don't think Tom wishes to marry me," she added, after a little pause.

"On the contrary, your grandfather says that Tom assented quite readily, but that the obstacle lay with you, and he has asked me to talk it over with you, Mab."

A slow and painful blush crept up over Mab's face; for a moment she was silent; then with an effort she said, falteringly:

"Do you not think that perhaps Tom was compelled to agree—that his consent was wrung from him? Oh, mother dear, the whole subject is so dreadfully painful to me, must we talk of it?"

"My darling child," said Mrs. Eardley, gently, "is it not better to talk, if by talking things can be set right? I want to say a few very serious words to you, Mab. Have you ever considered what is to become of you after I am dead?"

"Oh, mother, pray don't speak so!"

"But indeed, Mab, I must; you surely see now for yourself that my life is a very precarious one. I would rather you looked the truth in the face. I cannot live long. I have lost most of my little savings; at my death there will be next to nothing for you—you will be entirely dependent upon your grandfather. He is, I believe, prepared to do a great deal for you if only you will fall in with his wishes. I ask you, is it worth while to set these wishes at naught? I myself have always disapproved of the marriage of first cousins, but I am prepared to waive this objection in order to secure your future. You cannot really dislike Tom, Mab? Indeed I fancied, a little while ago, I thought I perceived that you actually loved him. Was I mistaken?"

"Mother, I entreat you not to question me!" cried Mab, distractedly. Never had she regretted her promise to Tom more intensely. She longed with all her heart to tell her mother that Tom was engaged to Dorothy Duke, but her promise of secrecy tied her lips; she had no right to betray his confidence.

"I cannot marry Tom;" she repeated, a little wildly.

"Why?"

"I have told my grandfather that I object to taking the name of Spinks," answered Mab, with a nervous laugh.

"My dear Mab, that excuse will not satisfy me! It is pure childishness! What's in a name? If you loved Tom, would you consider such a trifle for a moment, any more than your aunt Amabel did when she married his father?"

"How is it possible that she could have loved him?" cried Mab, warmly.

"She did love him. It is the fashion, I know, to say that your poor aunt married for money, but I know better; she was my friend, and, strange as it may seem that that man should have excited a genuine passion in the heart of any nice woman, yet it is a fact that she did see qualities in him that others could not detect, and that she learned to care for him. You see she had hardly seen any other young man in her life, and many a girl has fancied herself in love with her first suitor for the simple reason that he is the first, and that no others are in the field."

"Yes," said Mab, thoughtfully, "that is quite true."

"That your poor aunt Amabel's married life was desperately unhappy afterwards; that she learnt almost to loathe the man she had once loved, does not alter the case. But after all, my dear, Tom is very different to his father, and if you could learn to love him——"

Mab started up suddenly and paced the room quickly between her mother's couch and the window. She stood there for a moment with her back turned to the room, gazing fixedly at the open sea beyond the bay, where so lately the "Sea Nymph" had disappeared below the line of the horizon.

A tumult of conflicting feelings battled at her heart. "Do I love him?" she asked herself passionately. "Am I indeed weak and base enough to love a man who has told me that he is bound to another, who looks upon me only as a sister?—a man, too, who has traded upon my good nature by trampling upon my woman's pride? Is it possible that I can still care for him? If he were free to-morrow, would I restore him to the place where my foolish fancy once placed him?" Then like a flash there came back to her the face of the man who had startled and confused her by his avowal of a love she had not dreamt of: the man who had gone

away out there, beyond the shield of still gray waters.

She seemed to see him once more, with his strong irregular features and his queer picturesque coloring, the blonde hair, the brown skin, the burning eyes of forget-me-not blue. Why did this image continue to haunt her?—whilst Tom, for whose sake she had lost him, retreated further and further away into a dim background of past emotions, which no longer had power to stir her, save, indeed, with a faint sensation of contempt and indignation?

At least Achille de Vernet was a man. Whereas Tom—poor Tom!—who dared not speak, who was afraid of his father and afraid of his lady-love; could anything be more unmanly than his present position?

"There are times, dear mother," cried Mab, vehemently, coming back impulsively to her mother's side, "times when not only do I feel that I do not love my cousin Tom, but when I find a difficulty in deciding that I do not actually hate him!"

Then Mrs Eardley realized that her child's heart was a closed book to her, and she wisely said no more.

CHAPTER XXX.

"MAB," said Tom, meeting his cousin one morning a couple of days later, along one of the narrow passages of the house, "come in here, I have something to tell you." He took her hand and drew her into an unused room and shut the door.

Tom had spoken in a nervous whisper; his eyes shone oddly; his hand, as he held hers, trembled; he was evidently laboring under intense, although suppressed excitement.

Mab waited in silent expectation.

"She has promised to marry me," gasped Tom, "to marry me at once!"

"Dorothy Duke?"

"Yes, of course; who else? Oh, Mab, she is an angel, that girl!"

"But have you told grandpapa? Has your father consented? Is the secret known at last?" queried Mab, hurriedly and excitedly; and in that moment she was glad, very glad, not only for Tom's sake, but for her own; for here would be the end of mysteries and decep-

tions, and of the false position into which she had been unwillingly thrust.

But she was jumping at conclusions too hastily.

"No, no!" said Tom; and again his voice sank to a whisper, "that was out of the question. She would not hear of that; on the contrary, there is more occasion for secrecy than ever, for she has consented to do a wonderful thing for me, Mab—a thing which must cost her a great deal, and which proves to me how deeply she must really love me."

"Yes? What is it?"

Somehow Mab felt that Tom did not come very easily to the point.

"Well, I don't know quite what you will say, Mab, but we have settled that you must be in our confidence, because she wants you to help her about the details, and so on; and we both know how staunch and true you are, dear, little Mab."

"Yes!" said Mab again. "Suppose you leave off paying me compliments, Tom, and tell me what you want me to do?"

"Well, I must just explain to you. I am going away this afternoon. I have told my father and grandfather that I have got a sudden

invitation from a chap who has some very good trout fishing in Devonshire; they quite believe it's all right, and I am to have the dog-cart to catch the afternoon train, do you see?"

Mab nodded. Lies did not commend themselves to her; but she forbore from remark.

"Well, instead of going to Devonshire I am going straight up to London on a matter of business, Mab! Such business, as you will hear! And I shall come back to Bristol to-morrow, to the Royal Hotel, and there my dear girl has promised to meet me in the evening, and next morning we are going to be married, for I shall have brought the special license down from town in my pocket! What do you think of that, Mab?" he added, triumphantly, rubbing his hands gleefully together.

"I don't like it at all, Tom, not at all!" cried Mab, excitedly. "A runaway match! An elopement! I think it's a dreadful thing to do, if you ask me!"

"But, Mab! it is the only way. Dorothy is convinced that we should never gain his consent beforehand, but that when we are once married, my father will come round to the idea of it, and he will then have to forget all about that stupid plan of my marrying you! You see,

Dorothy has been making up to the governor all this time, and she is so clever she has got him to take a great fancy to her, and she is certain, if we play our cards properly, that he will forgive us, and make no difference towards me, if once we are married. As to Portalloc, well, grandfather may or may not leave it to me. But Dorothy doesn't like the place, and thinks it would cost much more than it is worth to put it into decent repair, and so I must just risk losing it; and the money, of course, is much more important to us. She is good enough to lay aside her objection to my going into the business, if we go up to London for part of the year, she says. But then Dorothy is so sweet, and good, and reasonable about everything!" he added, with the fond infatuation of a lover, who can see no flaw in his idol.

"And what do you want me to do in the matter, Tom?" asked Mab; and for the life of her she could not help the words from sounding cold and unsympathetic.

"Well, you see, Dorothy herself must manage to get away from here to-morrow; she is going to pretend she has a letter from her aunt in the morning, summoning her back to Townchester."

"But Mrs. Duke is still at sea in the yacht."

"Oh, she can say her aunt was taken ill, and has left the 'Sea Nymph,' and gone home."

"Is there any occasion to tell so many lies, Tom?"

"I am afraid so; I don't like lies any better than you, Mab; but, you see, I suppose one has to harden one's heart to tell them sometimes."

"It is Dorothy who has hardened you to them, Tom," Mab could not help saying, and Tom colored up all over his fresh boyish face, that was honest and truthful as the day by nature. He could find no answer, for he knew that Mab spoke the truth.

"You won't refuse to help us, will you, Mab?" was his only remark.

"I don't quite see what I am to do," she answered, coldly.

"Oh, you have only got to back up her story, and help her to pack, and pretend she is quite well enough to travel, as indeed she is, for she has confided to me that she can walk perfectly since the last two days; only she kept it up, so as to stay on here. Don't look shocked, Mab! When a girl loves a man, as my Dorothy loves me, she'll say and do anything to keep near him, as you will find out for yourself some day!"

Mab secretly hoped she might never perjure herself, or deceive all her friends and relations, for the sake of any man on earth, but she prudently forbore to say so.

"And we want you to break it to grandfather after we are married, and to my father too, if he is still here; and to make the best of it for us, and take our part, will you?"

"Yes, I will do that. And, oh!" she added, with a sudden return of her old affectionate loyalty towards him, "I do hope, from my heart, that you will be happy, Tom; and that Dorothy will make you a good wife!"

"No fear at all about that!" replied Tom, confidently and gaily.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THAT some mud is sure to stick, if only enough of it is thrown, is a saying which is too well accredited to need affirmation. Achille de Vernet had told himself very angrily that Miss Duke's letter was as false as herself, and that he should certainly not believe a word of it; nevertheless he could not help reading it many times over, and wondering if it might not be true, after all, that Mab Eardley was engaged to her cousin.

If so, then she had told him a lie, for she had distinctly denied that she was engaged to any one. Yet her hesitation, her distress, her tears, seemed all to point to some complication which he could not understand. He did not take into account the surprise and confusion which his avowal had caused her. Sure of his own feelings, he had scarcely realized that the idea of being loved by him was totally new to her, and that a girl of modest feelings, such as Mab, cannot accustom herself in a minute to the dis-

covery that a man who is almost a stranger has conceived a real affection for her. Achille's Gallic nature, a nature full of sudden impulses and hot resolves, made him see nothing wonderful in the position; but he forgot that Mab was that most sensitive and delicate of all organizations, a simple-hearted English girl, and that it was not in her nature to receive such a declaration as his with anything but reserve and doubt. Had she been as heart-whole as he wished her to be, Mab could have given him no other answer but "No," under the circumstances. And Mab was, as we know, in a transition stage: she had loved, or thought that she had loved; and the love was not dead in her; it was only crumbling inch by inch to pieces, like the rugged battlements of her grandfather's Castle. Time would have destroyed her love for Tom in any case, but a sudden blow from without could only result in temporary chaos of mind, and a whirlpool of indecision and hesitation. Nevertheless, Miss Duke's letter taught Monsieur de Vernet one thing: it taught him that time was his best friend. If Mab meant to marry her cousin she would do so, and he should never see her again; but if the marriage did not take place, he would take heart of

grace and hope, and go back to her by and by, when she had had plenty of time to think, and to get accustomed to the remembrance of the words that had passed between them.

He thought about her a great deal, and found the time hang very heavy on his hands on board the "Sea Nymph." Dorothy had at least amused him, and had kept things lively. He was forced to confess that as a companion she had been valuable, and that it was desperately dull without her.

He would not, however, desert a host and hostess who had been kind to him, but stuck to them manfully to the end of the cruise; making himself quite necessary to Captain Duke, and unwittingly arousing a tender feeling in the heart of the poor neglected plain Florence, by his pretty manners and pleasant attentions. And perhaps the dull quiet fortnight that followed helped to engrave the memory of Mab Eardley all the deeper into his heart.

He was certain now that he had been right, that the sudden love he had felt for her was a real and true feeling, and that she was the only woman on earth for him. He was certain, too, that he intended to bide his time, even if it were months or even years, and that some day

he would go back to Portalloc, and if she were still free, try his luck once more.

When that day was to come he could not tell, for he did not know that fate or destiny, or whatever it is that has the control of human life, was working out for him a much more speedy realization of his wishes than he could possibly have hoped for, and that circumstances were shaping themselves out at Portalloc in a totally unforeseen direction.

Tom went away as he had arranged, and the "friend in Devonshire" was firmly believed in by everybody at the Castle excepting Mab, and, of course, Dorothy.

After he had gone, it seemed to Mab that Dorothy became very restless and nervous, but, of course, there was nothing surprising to her in that, considering the tremendous enterprise which she was about to undertake.

Mab, with her usual directness, went straight to the point with her.

"Tom has told me your plans, Dorothy. I can't say that I approve of people doing what you and he intend to do, especially as it seems to entail so many lies."

"But, you dear, sensitive-conscienced little thing!" interrupted Miss Duke, with some-

thing so like a sneer that Mab colored,—"nobody wants *you* to risk your eternal soul by telling lies!"

"No, that is true. And I should not tell them, Dorothy, not even for you and Tom! But, all the same, I have got to sit by and listen and say nothing. It is a desperate step to take, too, and I don't half like it! But,"—turning to her with a sudden impulse, and clasping both her hands,—"at all events, you *will* be good to Tom, won't you, Dorothy? When you are his wife you will try to make him happy, won't you?"

"Why, of course, of course!" assented Dorothy, lightly, and then she drew Mab's face down and kissed it. "Ah, I really believe I ought to be very jealous of you, Mab, you are so tremendously fond of my Tom!"

"Oh, no, Dorothy, not in *that* way!" cried Mab, drawing back hastily. "I am certainly very fond of him as a cousin, and I know that he loves you very deeply; sometimes I am half afraid you don't quite realize it, or value it enough. And I care enough for him, I confess, to be very anxious about his future happiness!"

"Don't be anxious, my dear, I shall be as good as gold! And what is more, Mab, I give him

leave to love you, and you to love him. Oh, as *cousins*, of course! As much as ever you both like!"

After this conversation Mab felt a little happier, and helped Dorothy to make the preparations for her departure with a lighter heart. As usual with her, she tried to look at the brightest side of things; distasteful as such a course of action was to herself, there was nothing sinful in a runaway match, beyond the untruths which it entailed, and by which alone it could be carried out. And Mab told herself that such a very desperate step must, at all events, prove beyond all doubt Dorothy did care deeply for the man for whose sake she risked so much.

She reasoned herself, too, into believing that Dorothy must have good grounds for thinking that Tom's father would be a lenient judge of a proceeding which gave him so fair a daughter-in-law, who was evidently also a great favorite with himself. She saw from her mother's window, where she was seated that afternoon, that Dorothy went out for her first little walk since her accident, leaning upon her future father-in-law's arm. They walked together for some time up and down the bowling-green, and seemed

to be quite absorbed in conversation. Mab had by now banished all unworthy suspicions from her mind, and she told herself that Dorothy was both wise and clever in making such friends with Tom's father; only she wondered why, having progressed so far in his good opinion, she did not go a step farther, and throw herself upon his kindness and friendly feeling entirely, by confessing the whole truth, and asking his consent to their marriage. "That is what I should have done in her place," thought Mab; "however, I suppose they know their own business best!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MRS. EARDLEY had a very bad night, and Mab was kept up in her room until a late hour the following morning. It was nearly twelve o'clock when she made her way down-stairs, and the first thing her grandfather told her when she went into his library to wish him good morning, was that Mr. Spinks had gone away directly after breakfast, to catch the morning train to Birmingham.

"Gone away! Is it not very sudden? He had no thoughts of leaving last night, had he?"

"No, not that I know of," replied Mr. Eardley, "but it seems he had some business letters this morning, and he told me he must start at once. And, oddly enough, we are to lose Miss Duke this afternoon also!"

"Indeed!" And Mab only just managed to bring out this one word of inquiry with considerable difficulty.

"Yes, her aunt has sent for her; she is not

well, it appears, and has gone home. Miss Duke tells me she is quite fit to travel, but I can hardly believe it. I think I ought to send one of the maids with her. She surely cannot be strong enough to go all that way by herself. What do you think?"

It was here Mab knew, in a circumstance like this, that Tom had reckoned upon her help, and so she hardened her conscience, and, with more actual truth than in her last faltering word, answered with much decision:

"If you ask me, grandpapa, I should say that she is *quite* able to travel alone. I believe her to be perfectly well now."

"Ah, perhaps you and I may both be a little of the same mind, my dear!" remarked Mr. Eardley, with a smile. "That young lady has been keeping it up for the last few days, I fancy! She found her quarters comfortable, I expect, and appreciated my best champagne!" and the old man chuckled, and gave her something very like a wink out of the corner of his eye. "However, now she is going, and the carriage is ordered for her at three o'clock, and I am not sorry, Mab, not sorry at all, to be alone again with you and your poor mother." And then he proceeded to make very minute and interested

inquiries after Mrs. Eardley's health, to which Mab answered sadly enough, for day by day her mother seemed to grow more feeble and fragile. Just as she was leaving the room he called her back, and, taking her hand, he patted it kindly between his own.

"Don't you let your poor mother fret, Mab. Tell her from me she is not to worry herself about your future. I'll see to all that. Tom or no Tom, I shall not leave you to starve! And I think you care about the old place, my dear, and would like to live here with me, whatever happens?"

"Dear grandpapa, of course!" and Mab's eyes filled with tears.

"We'll arrange all that, tell her, you and I together; don't let her be unhappy about it."

Miss Duke took her departure, as had been arranged, at three o'clock, Mr. Eardley and Mab standing at the front door to see her off. She thanked the old gentleman very prettily for his hospitality and kindness, and kissed Mab affectionately.

"You will write and tell me everything, will you not?" whispered Mab in her ear, and Miss Duke smiled and nodded an assent, as she jumped into the carriage with a haste and ac-

tivity which forbade any reminder of the sprain in her side. Mab thought she was flushed and radiant with happiness and excitement, and was not surprised at it.

The old house felt very quiet and still after she was gone. Mrs. Eardley had rallied a little, and Mab was able to leave her. She walked about in the gardens, and had a little ride on the old pony with her grandfather in the afternoon. The two were quite happy together, and it was a load off Mab's mind when the old man spoke to her of his own accord about Tom.

"It is a disappointment to me, of course, my dear," he said to her; "I had hoped to leave Portalloc to you and your cousin jointly, and that his money would have set the old place in order; but if you are quite sure that you can't marry Tom ——?" and he looked at her wistfully.

"I am quite sure that I cannot marry him, grandpapa. Perhaps, before very long, you will understand why," she added, smiling.

"Oh, so it's not the name altogether, Puss!"

"Not altogether," admitted Mab, with a laugh, "but it is an ugly name, certainly."

"Very ugly. But others have got over that and so might you, if you loved Tom," he added.

It was almost word for word what her mother had said!

"I do not love him," said Mab, in a low voice; and for the first time she knew that this was indeed true. Her love for Tom was utterly dead.

The next morning it was fine and warm, and Mab thought a great deal about Tom and Dorothy; it was their wedding-day, and she was glad the sun shone and that the sky was blue. About half-past ten she went into her room and read the marriage service carefully through, trying to picture to herself how they were being actually married at that moment. And then she knelt down by her bedside and prayed God to bless them, and thanked Him too that all the pain and jealousy had died out of her own heart, so that she could pray so fervently and earnestly for them both.

Her mother was better again to-day; and by-and-by Mab took out her trout-rod, Tom's present to her, which she had thought once she could never bear to touch again, and went out towards the river. She looked in at Sheenan's cottage, and got the old fisherman to come with her to carry her basket and landing-net; and then for two long hours was Miss Eardley completely and entirely happy, as she threw her fly

across the deep slumberous pools, or whipped the rippling stream as it rushed over the shallow bottoms of the river.

And the little brown trout rose freely, and Mab felt all the keen elation of sport, as one after the other were safely landed and lay together in a shiny heap in her creel.

She came back to the Castle at luncheon time, hot and hungry, happy and triumphant; and there at the door stood her old grandfather, looking out for her anxiously. A small boy from the village, with a semi-official strap across his back, stood outside the house; and as Mr. Eardley caught sight of his granddaughter, he went out to meet her, waving a tawny orange envelope in the air.

"Here you are at last!" he cried. "Who is sending you telegrams with 'reply paid,' please, Miss Puss? I very nearly opened it myself; the boy has been waiting nearly an hour."

Mab opened the envelope hurriedly. It must be from Tom, of course, to tell her that the wedding had taken place. But the first glance at the message startled her considerably.

"D. has not arrived; am in despair. What is wrong?—is she ill?—TOM."

The woods and hills, and the ruined towers of the Castle all seemed to sway and dance together in a chaotic jumble in front of Mab's eyes. Yet she had the presence of mind not to utter a sound.

"Is anything wrong, Mab? You have turned quite white."

"It is nothing," she said a little faintly. "A mere trifle, grandpapa; telegrams do so frighten one. I cannot tell you what this one is about—please don't ask me," she added, hurriedly. "But I must answer it at once."

Mr. Eardley was puzzled, but he forbore to question her, and Mab went into the house and wrote her reply:

"D. left here yesterday afternoon; was quite well."

This she gave to the boy who was waiting.

The rest of her day was scarcely spent so happily as the morning had been. Again she tended her mother and read to her; and again she walked and rode with her grandfather, who, to her relief, preserved considerate silence upon the subject of the telegram. Mab strove hard to be as cheerful as usual, but the effort was

scarcely successful, for a presentiment of unknown evil lay like a weight at her heart. What could have happened to Dorothy? Had she at the last moment been afraid to commit such an indiscretion as a runaway match? Had she, after all, gone back really and truly to Townchester to her aunt's house? Yet, if so, surely she would have telegraphed to Tom! Mab could not make head or tail of it. She could only hope there might have been some stoppage or delay on the railway, and that Dorothy would turn up at Bristol by a later train and that all would end well.

She awaited the morning post with intense anxiety. She was down early, and flew eagerly to the sideboard. A letter lay upon it for her, in Dorothy's handwriting. She tore it open, scarcely noticing that the post-mark on the envelope was *Birmingham.* It was only a scrap of a note, but at the foot of the page the signature stood out large and clear, "Dorothy Spinks." She breathed anew. All was well then!

Then with a startled amazement she read as follows:—

"DEAR MAB,—You will be very much aston-

ished, I dare say, when I tell you that I was married this morning to Mr. Spinks. I found, on the whole, that I preferred the father to the son. We are just off to Paris for our honeymoon.—Yours affectionately,

"DOROTHY SPINKS."

For the first and only time in her life Mab fainted away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NEVER as long as life lasts will Mab forget the terrible sequel to that morning's news. The events of that dreadful day are graven forever upon her heart in letters of blood and fire; and although it is all over now and time has, to a certain extent, healed and softened the first horror of it, yet she will never again be quite the same light-hearted, happy girl as of old, and a certain solemnity seems to linger always in the deep shadowy eyes that were once so merry and so free from care. For, to this day, the slightest word or look is enough to bring back to her the memory of that sad day, and to plunge her soul once more in the blackness of a never-to-be-forgotten calamity.

This is what happened:

Mab had recovered her senses, and picked herself up from the floor where she had fallen just as her grandfather entered the breakfast-room; with a very white face and chattering teeth she staggered towards him, holding the letter she had received extended in her hand.

There was no thought of concealment now in her mind. She sank into a chair and buried her face upon the table with a groan.

"Why, my dear child, what has happened?" cried Mr. Eardley, much concerned by her woe-begone appearance. "You look half dead!"

"Read—read!" gasped Mab, faintly.

The old man poured her out a glass of wine and made her swallow it before he did anything else; the wine revived her, and drove the deadly faintness away. Yet again she pointed to the letter and ejaculated, "Read it, read it!"

Then Mr. Eardley did read Dorothy's note. His comment upon it was a peal of hearty laughter, which jarred and hurt her like the rough edge of a saw.

"What a joke!" he cried. "So that was the young lady's game! I did certainly wonder why old Spinks stayed on here so long!—ha! ha! She's as clever as the devil, that young woman! Poor old Spinks!"

"Grandpapa, it is *terrible!*" gasped Mab, with woe-stricken eyes.

"My dear child, *ludicrous*, if you like: rather disgraceful too, for that woman is no better than an adventuress, I think. But *terrible!* Oh no, I see nothing 'terrible' about it!"

"Oh, you don't understand. Tom—there is Tom to think of!"

"What has Tom got to do with it? It would be certainly 'terrible' if poor Tom had married her, for I am afraid she must be a very worthless creature, Mab—I am, indeed. But Tom's father can take care of himself, I fancy! And Mrs. Spinks won't find it all a bed of roses as his wife, in spite of his money-bags!"

And then Mab, seeing that circumstances no longer bound her to keep her promise to her cousin, made a clean breast of it to her grandfather and told him all.

"They had been engaged for months, grandpapa—for months! Tom adored her; they were to have been married yesterday at Bristol. I was in his confidence, and that was why there could never be any question of his marrying me. This news will break his heart! He believed in her so thoroughly. I feared something when that telegram came yesterday to tell me she had not arrived. Yet I never could have imagined that she could have treated him so abominably and so cruelly as this! Oh, grandpapa, what *will* become of poor Tom? He will go mad when he hears of it!"

Mr. Eardley looked grave enough now; he walked over to where a heap of his own letters lay upon the table, and began looking through them. "Spinks will have written to me, I expect," he muttered.

"Ah, yes!" selecting one and opening it. When he had read it, he threw it across the table to Mab without a word.

"DEAR MR. EARDLEY," wrote the millionaire, "there is no law against a widower marrying again, and so I hope you will forgive me, and believe that I mean no disrespect to poor Amabel's memory, when I tell you that I was married this morning to the beautiful and charming young lady who has so lately been your guest. My dear Dorothy consented to make me the happiest of men about a week ago, but we judged it wiser to keep the matter secret until we were actually married; she came to Birmingham last night, and we were married quietly at an early hour to-day. This will, of course, make a difference in my intentions towards Tom, as I must make provision for the children of my second wife, in case she should have a family. I will, however, give Tom a share in the business, and will leave him a

certain competency in case you are still bent on his marriage with Mab. This, however, we can discuss after my return from Paris, for which city Mrs. Spinks and I start this evening for a three weeks' holiday. Hoping you will all drink to our health and happiness.—Believe me, dear sir, yours always,

"JOSEPH SPINKS."

After reading this letter Mab said nothing, and in a gloomy silence the two sat down and made a pretense of eating some breakfast together.

"Would you like me to go to Bristol and bring your cousin Tom home, Mab?" inquired Mr. Eardley, presently.

"Oh, dear grandpapa, if you only would!" exclaimed Mab, gratefully. "I believe that the shock of this will make him seriously ill."

"Let me understand one thing first, Mab," continued her grandfather, gravely. "Now that this miserable engagement is at an end, is there any chance at all that you and Tom may make it up together? By and by, I mean, when he has had time to get over this?"

"Oh no, grandpapa, not the slightest chance," cried Mab, emphatically.

"Why, my dear? I want a better reason than the name of 'Spinks' this time, Mab," he added, with a faint smile.

For a moment or two Mab was silent, playing with the dry toast she had been trying to swallow. The color rose red and warm into her face. Suddenly she lifted her head and looked her grandfather full in the eyes.

"You *shall* have a better reason, grandpapa," she said, with a ring of truth and of candor in her voice which pleased him. "Once I *was* rather fond of Tom; I think, indeed, I might have grown to love him very much—but that was at first, before he told me his secret; but after she came here everything was changed to me; I cared—but I cared no longer in that way. You see, he loved her—whilst he treated me as his sister—and that made all the difference. And now, I know by something else, that the feeling I once had for him can never, never come back to me! It was not a very real feeling; I know this now because—because——"

"Because what, my child?"

"Because I believe I have fallen in love with some one else," said Mab, demurely, dropping her eyes, with a little smile; and the words

came out with the simple directness of a child who confesses having done wrong.

"Hum!" said the old man, after a pause, during which an inkling came to him that was not far from the truth. "Well, now we understand one another, Mab. So, my dear, go and fetch me the Bradshaw."

But long before the old gentleman had completed his simple preparations for the journey to Bristol, an awful summons had bidden him there in all haste, in the shape of that terrible telegram, which Mab at his desire opened and read aloud to him:—

"Eardley, Portalloc Castle.

"Gentleman, name Spinks, blown brains out here half-an-hour ago. Your name found on telegram received yesterday. Come at once. Inquest to-morrow.

"Landlord, Royal Hotel, Bristol."

Alas, poor Tom! The madness of utter despair had befallen him on receipt of the letter from his father, which gave him the news of Dorothy's perfidy; and in his desperation he did what other poor grief-torn souls have done before him,—he took his own life, and

plunged his soul into the abyss of the unknown, sooner than live on to drag out the burden which seemed to him to be too heavy to be borne. And surely his blood is upon the woman who drove him to his fearful end!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SORROWS seldom come alone; and the consequences of Dorothy Duke's deceit and perfidy were continuous and far-reaching. It was necessary to reveal Tom's terrible death to Mrs. Eardley, and although Mab broke the news to her with all care and tenderness, there was no possibility of wrapping up the hideous truth so that it should not be a most overwhelming shock.

And virtually it was the shock of the news that killed her. The poor lady was already weakened beyond belief by her previous attack, and her heart was in the last stages of a fatal disease. In any case she could not have lived many months, but no doubt the news of Tom's suicide hastened her end. That one so young and bright, one whom she had thought at one time to look upon as a son, should have taken his own life in a moment of despair, caused her an anguish scarcely less poignant than Mab's, and she was far less able to sustain it.

Mab's grief was piteous to witness; even for her mother's sake she was at first unable to control it. She had loved Tom to the end as a brother; once she had loved him as something even dearer; that she was never to see his pleasant, merry face any more, never hear his cheery laugh, or be the object of his kindly banter, caused her one of those sorrows which is, as I have said, not a matter of time, but life-long and enduring. Yet, when she perceived how disastrous were the effects of her grief upon her mother's enfeebled frame, she did struggle with all her might to control every outward exhibition of it; only to give way more completely, in the rare intervals when she found herself alone. Soon in the stress of great illness, and in the agony of a fresh calamity, poor Mab was forced to lay aside her sorrow for Tom's death. For, little more than three weeks from the day of his funeral, Mrs. Eardley died; and Mab was left to face that loss for which there is no compensation ever again on earth—the loss of a mother's all-endur ing love.

It was a sad and a terrible time both to the young girl and the old man; and these days of grief and mourning drew them both strangely

together, and knit their hearts strongly to one another.

There followed a long cold autumn and winter at Portalloc, and then a late spring—a spring of nipping east winds and blighting frosts, so that the two, left alone in the old house, kept much indoors, and were thrown entirely upon each other's society. During that long winter, too, the crippled girl at the cottage in the creek died; and old Williams, the fisherman, did as many of his betters have done, married a buxom young woman, sister of the publican in the village, who brought new life, together with a little money, into the cottage at the harbor. But Mab did not take to young Mrs. Williams, and missed her gentle protégée sorely, and she seldom went to the fisherman's house now.

All this time she had heard nothing of Achille de Vernet; and it sometimes seemed to her that his words to her had been nothing but a dream, and that, like all other things in life that she had once loved, he too was lost to her for ever.

At first she had been too unhappy and too cast down in health and spirits to think very much about him; but as the days lengthened and the trees put forth their tender greenery,

and the voices of the birds arose in the woods, and the cold spring gave way before the warm foot of summer, then love and memory awoke once more in Mab's heart, and she began to wonder long and secretly whether the young Frenchman had forgotten her, or if he would ever come to Portalloc again. He had promised to return; would he keep that promise?

A fair May was followed by a balmy June; Mab's broken spirits began to revive; she walked and rode, and read and talked all day long with her grandfather. He could scarcely bear her out of his sight now; often the two would wander for hours together amongst the towers and walls of the venerable ruins, planning and arranging and disputing over their restoration as though, in truth, the great work was to begin at once. Mab was as devoted to Portalloc as the old man now; and many were the eager and heated discussions which took place between them, as to which portion of the building it would be best to begin upon when the restorations actually began.

Mr. Eardley desired above all to restore the fallen chapel. Mab was in favor of the nearly perfect guard-room: she had a weakness for that guard-room somehow! Was it not here

that Achille de Vernet had first talked to her with interest and attention?

One morning Mab summoned up heart, and went away by herself to the river with her rod. She made a great effort to do this, believing that it would soften the pain of her memories of poor Tom if she could bring herself to enjoy the sport he had taught her. It made her very sad; but though she had no sport at all, and though she could sometimes scarcely see the river for her blinding tears, she was glad that she had broken the spell, and had found the strength to resume her old amusement.

She was not very long away, not more than an hour, for she did not like to leave her grandfather long alone. When she returned to the Castle there was a fly standing before the door, and a footman met her in the hall, and told her that a gentleman had called, and was in the library with her grandfather.

The man did not volunteer the visitor's name, and Mab did not ask it. But presently, as she lingered in the hall pulling her rod to pieces, and putting it away into its case, her name rang out through the silent house.

"Mab! Is that you?"

"Yes, grandpapa."

"Come here at once. Here is somebody who wants to see you."

She went up-stairs unsuspecting and unprepared; her black and white cotton dress was tumbled and damp with water-drops, her black sailor hat had fallen a little to one side, and her hair was rough and wind-blown; yet Mab looked sweet and fair enough to please any man, thought the old man as he watched her come lightly up the steep staircase towards him.

He took her by the hand when she came to the landing, and drew her fondly towards him, kissing her gently on the forehead.

"Be happy, my dear child, be happy! I want to see you happy before I die," he murmured in her ear; and then he half drew, half pushed her into the room behind him, closing the door upon her, so that she went in alone.

Wondering, and a little bewildered, Mab made three steps into the room. Her color had risen, her heart was beating a little, she knew not what to expect; and yet perhaps after all she did know, for when a woman loves one man, that man is never very far distant from her thoughts.

Perhaps it was no such very great surprise to her to see Achille de Vernet standing in one of

the deep recesses of the windows. He turned quickly at the sound of the opening door, and came eagerly forward to meet her. He had prepared all sorts of speeches beforehand to make to her, elaborate speeches to explain his return, and to make known to her in a careful and roundabout way that it was for her sake alone that he had come back. And yet somehow when he saw her he said nothing at all that he had intended to say, and the words that he had planned were all forgotten.

All he did was to clasp her two hands very tight and hard in his, and to speak her name under his breath.

"Mab, Mab!"

Then she lifted her eyes to his, and she saw in them the light of love and of joy, so that somehow that look of gladness found its reflection in her face also, and the lover saw it there.

"You have come back, then?" she murmured, a little brokenly. "And I, who thought that I should never see you again!"

"Why did you think that? Why did you not trust me better? I told you that I should come back and ask you once more; you won't send me away this time, will you?"

Then looking intently into her face, he saw

that her eyes filled slowly with tears, and all the sympathy and pity in his heart awoke in him at the sight, and he longed to comfort her almost more than he longed to love her.

"Oh, my poor little darling!" he said; and then very gently and tenderly he drew her into his arms, till she lay unresistingly upon his breast, with her head upon his shoulder. "Ah, what a dreadful time you have had! What shocks, what sorrows! If you only knew how my heart has ached for you! Mab, will you let me try and make up a little to you for all that you have lost, all that you have gone through?"

She clung to him, weeping quietly; but presently the warm pressure of his grasp, and the soft touch of his hands upon her hair, seemed to soothe and comfort her, so that her tears ceased. Then he bent his face gently, and kissed her tenderly and reverently, first on one cheek and then on the other.

A little later they found themselves seated side by side together on the sofa. And there were no more tears in Mab's eyes now, only the light of a great and happy love.

"But I can never leave grandpapa, never whilst he lives!" she said.

"Ah, we have arranged all that, the grandpapa and I!" he answered, gaily. "You will never be asked to leave him, my dear one. We have had a long talk together, he and I; and he said he would give you to me if I could win you, on one condition, that I should not take you away from him, but that we should live here with him at Portalloc always. Do you know, Mab, that your grandpapa is a very dear old man; it was he who wrote to me one day, not very long ago, and told me to come back and try my luck with you."

"Grandpapa did that? Oh! but how?"

"Well, it seems that you said something one day, and he guessed that perhaps I might have a chance with you."

"Ah, I remember!" and Mab smiled.

"You must know," continued her lover, "that I am no longer a poor man. There was an uncle of mine in the West Indies; he has died lately, and has left me his money; it is more, a great deal, than I expected it to be, though I always knew he would make me his heir, but I did not know he was so rich; so that now I am a comparatively rich man. And so I am going to live with you at Portalloc always, if you will have me, Mab?—with you and your

grandfather. It is what the dear old man whishes himself, and I have promised him to restore the chapel and the guard-room."

"The guard-room first, please," said Mab smiling.

"Yes. certainly the guard-room first! You and I will always love the guard-room, Mab, will we not? And Mr. Eardley says he is going to teach me how to become an English squire; I am only, you know, a stupid duffer of a Frenchman, but I am going to try and learn how to be an English country gentleman, for the sake of my dear wife."

And then for some minutes neither of them spoke.

Presently he said to her:

"You were never engaged to that poor fellow, were you, Mab?"

"Never. He was engaged to her, you know —to that woman—all the time. He adored her; it was she who caused his death."

"Ah, so I have been told. Poor Tom!"

And "Poor Tom!" echoed Mab, with a sigh.

THE END.

Vanity

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